

WDL

No.24

Zane Grey's

WESTERN



THE MAN FROM HELL

Complete Novel by
GEORGE C. APPELL

BEANTOWN BADMAN

A LOUDMOUTH JONES NOVELETTE BY
Thomas Thompson

2/-



She measured him coolly. "Your the new boy in school, aren't you?"

The Man from Hell, Chap. 4



ZANE GREY'S WESTERN

No. 24

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A COMPLETE NOVEL BY GEORGE C. APPELL

the man from hell

CHAPTER ONE

He Rides In

THE EIGHT-PIECE BAND that was the pride of Fiftyfour was thumping brassily into the dust-hung heat of late morning, the musicians' distended faces smudged already with damp alkali that was being tramped constantly upward by the boots and bare feet and pointed shoes of the population and of the visitors from the outlying vicin-

ities. For this was the Fourth of July, and a picture of the new President, Mr Grover Cleveland, was hanging in the wilted bunting above the rickety bandstand. This was Saturday, the Fourth of July, and Senator Tubman was expected to arrive on the Omaha stage and stop long enough to deliver a suitable oration. The streets were jammed with horses and rigs.

It was, as Coe Neely remarked to Mildred Lane while his eye swept the hot blue heavens, a glorious Fourth.



Tracy Silleck was a killer by trade. No kind of murder was new to him. His first job was an easy one—a simple trailside shot in bright sunlight. It all worked like a well-oiled machine—for that was Tracy Silleck: a smooth and efficient machine for murder. Then Coe Neely, the freckle-faced kid marshal, started growing up into his job. He set out to send Silleck, the man from hell, back where he came from!

"Yes," Mildred Lane answered. And that was all she said, because something was wrong and she knew it and Coe Neely knew it, and so did everyone else with an instinctive awareness of evil, which included most of the surviving populace of Fiftyfour.

You don't stake out a town and fence the prairie and build herds without that sixth sense—not if you would survive; and most of those who had lived through the early Indian raids and the flaming cattle wars and the lusty street

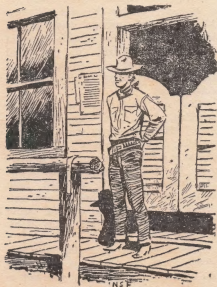
brawls carried that sense in their heads.

Coe Neely, Fiftyfour's marshal, had acquired it as he grew up, for he was too young to have participated in the settlement troubles. But it had helped him before as it was helping him now, and he wriggled his shoulders under impact of the strange uneasiness and took his eyes from the hot skies and placed them squarely upon the tawny curls that were tucked under Mildred Lane's saucy summer straw.

"I hope Tubman doesn't come. He'll blow all afternoon about his homestead bill."

Mildred nodded agreement. She was a small-boned young woman with deep brown eyes flecked with light blue specks. When she moved, she moved with the easy grace of a dancer, which drew men's eyes. She was not, however, a dancer, but a librarian. Fifty-four was becoming modern; it already had a library, a school building, a court house, and an eight-piece band. The school building had been a hog ranch not so long ago, a crib for the sale of tiswin; but with progress had come books and a globe and a long-handled rod.

Old Chris LaDue came loping out of the Sucker Lode Saloon, wiping his tangled beard and glancing furtively toward the bandstand. On days like this, men bought the old-timers drinks. Prosperous men. Big ranchers. And Old Chris



was broke. Been broke all year. Tending stable occasionally, and cadging off his niece, Jennie, who sang at the Sucker Lode evenings.

"Hullo, Coe. Mornin', Miss Lane." Before they could answer, Chris winced, hopped on one foot and grasped his other. A callused toe, thrusting through the broken end of his battered shoe, had struck a piece of glass in the dust. He thumbed blood from the ragged cut and let his foot down again.

"Like to kill a man, wound like that," he said.

The brassy music ended on a high note, and there was a scatter of applause. Franz Joseph Rauschenbach, the leader, bowed fatly and grinned. This leading the band, this being seen in high places, would help his blacksmithing business.

Mildred Lane raised a kerchief to her forehead, lifted her parasol against the sun, and said, "I've had enough of this heat, Coe."

"Meet me later?" He was taking off his hat to her, lifting it high. He was high himself, and narrow-hipped and hard-legged, so that when he raised his hat it seemed almost like a gesture, a signal, to a faraway companion.

"Let's say two o'clock." She looked up at him, liking what she saw. His mouth was too wide, really, and his nose too tilted; and with too many freckles. Not the peace-officer type, come to think of it. But she had been thinking of him for a long time.

Coe slanted his hat brim down over his left eye, flared it up over his right, and spoke through his side teeth to Chris LaDuc. "I'll buy you a drink for every pickpocket you spot for me in the crowd."

Chris scurried bandward.

The latticed doors of the Indian Queen

Hotel opened and Gerald Hawxhurst stepped into the street, touching the oiled dampness of his elegant mustaches. He was a handsome man with prematurely gray hair and a certain majesty of carriage that made him seem taller than he actually was. Only his eyes belied that majesty—they were as defiant as gun muzzles, reflecting the stamp of angrily-won success.

Coe nodded to him. "Patriots' Day starts early."

Hawxhurst smiled. "Patriotism, my young man, is the last refuge of scoundrels." His glance went quickly across the hats of the crowd, jumping nervously. "If Josh Tubman comes, you'll find me in the back room of the Sucker Lode."

"Shut your ranch for the day?" Coe liked to poke a finger at pomposity occasionally.

Gerald Hawxhurst didn't answer for a moment, because he was following Mildred Lane's passage down toward Berry's Rooms. The straight carry of her small shoulders, the measured swing and thrust of her lithe thighs beneath all-concealing holiday silk, fascinated him.

"No, my ranch is never closed for anything. I have a competent foreman." Hawxhurst's eyes rested on Coe's freckles. "A competent foreman is almost as essential as a competent owner." And he laughed and walked away. Hawxhurst had just returned from a business trip to Omaha, and evidently had felt no concern about leaving the Tiptoe in the hands of his top rider.

The rising heat of coming noon was slowly emptying the streets and filling the stores. In the saloons, you had to wait for a drink. Meals, by mutual agreement of the merchants, were being served

by Lionel Berry, who had set up a stove and a plank table under an old army tent, with a washtub of coffee boiling on the stove and pans of meat and bread on the table.

Coe was ambling toward the tent to get lunch when his attention was taken by a dusty horse and rider who appeared with the suddenness of a mirage. One minute they hadn't been there and the next minute they were—entering Front Street at a walk, dark against the white glare of sunlight.

Fear tapped Coe Neely on the conscience—not cowardice, but a warning instinct, a sense of awareness that told him to look sharp. He was young to the world and young to his job, but he had that one gift that is so indispensable to murderers, seducers, and peace officers: the gift of sensing when the time is ripe.

He watched the dusty horse^a and rider turn out of Front and into Western Boulevard, which was ten feet wider than Front, and with plankwalks. It was at the corner of Front and Western that Berry had his tent pitched. This rider pulled up there a moment and put his weight into one stirrup.

"Where's a good saloon?" His voice was spang-sharp, like the hammer-whang of a Winchester.

Lionel Berry stopped talking to himself and looked up. "Why, you're damned near into one. Right yonder there." And he pointed.

The rider stared down at Berry a moment longer, as if judging his market weight. Then he nodded, shifted in his saddle, and proceeded down Western toward the Sucker Lode.

Coe Neely was now able to discern his features and gear, which had been blotted out by the sun's shadow. His features were dark and brooding, like

the horizons before a summer storm. He had antagonistic eyes and a hard-lipped mouth and black hair that he wore long over his soiled crimson neckerchief. But with all that he retained a poise that was not so much sleekness as natural good looks. Despite the heavy muscles that were hunked into his chest and shoulders, he rode lightly as a cadet.

When he threw a leg off his saddle and dismounted at the saloon's tie-rail, he displayed an elegance that could have come only from habitual self-control, because he'd been long in the saddle and must have been bone-weary. That showed in the sweat-blackened cinchings and curd-flecked bits of his horse and in the sweat-rimed armpits and dust-furred boots of himself. His holsters and belt were well-oiled, though, and his wooden-butted .44s were clean. He stepped into the Sucker Lode and let the doors flap shut behind him.

Coe Neely released a stored-up breath and approached Lionel Berry. The lunch man, whose wife ran the boarding-house where Mildred Lane lived, eyed the marshal in a way that invited comment.

Coe shook his head. "Never saw him before."

"Doesn't seem like the friendly kind."

"No, he doesn't." Coe constructed a huge sandwich and stirred sugar into his coffee with a forefinger.

At the end of the street, Rauschenbach's Brass Band was getting ready for another noisy assault on willing ears. Picnic baskets were being opened in front of the bandstand, and mothers were clucking to excited children. Old Chris LaDue crouched under President Cleveland's benign countenance, watching for pickpockets. There was no sign

of the Omaha stage, which had been due at noon.

Lionel Berry stopped grumbling to himself long enough to observe, "He looks kinda like a half-breed, if you know what I mean."

"Maybe he is." Coe finished his sandwich and moved his coffee mug back and forth in time to the rhythms of *The Blue Danube*. This concert would go on until Senator Tubman arrived; and if he failed to come, it would go on until evening, when the fireworks would start.

Coe drained his coffee, paid a quarter for the meal, and sauntered across Western Boulevard to the Sucker Lode. He was attracted to the sullen stranger, and at the same time repelled by him.

He held open the half-doors, blinked a few times to get focus, and walked in. The stranger was standing at the bar, dusting himself with a flat-crowned black hat. He spoke quietly to the bartender and the bartender moved hurriedly.

Coe leaned on the bend of the bar and took note of the man in the back mirror. He stood somewhat over six feet, with a thick chest and flat hips. His frontier-style hair didn't seem so shaggy in this light, and his eyes were less antagonistic. He was, indeed, a picturesque man until you looked into his eyes, which had the disconcerting trick of staying too long on people and objects. There was in them a glint of inhumanity. But although his air was aloof and withdrawn, there was the suggestion of a coiled spring in his rigid back and the poise of his head.

There was tension in the saloon atmosphere. A couple of men standing farther along the bar glanced covertly at one another, murmuring questions. Other

men—townsmen, mostly—sat at tables, but the bar itself was almost empty. It was the midday lull between late-morning buoyancy and late-afternoon energy.

"I said sour mash," the stranger blurted.

The bartender stopped, bottle in hand. "Thought you said bourbon."

"I said sour mash." He twitched his long, flat fingers to his shirt pocket and jerked out papers and sacking and hung the sack between his teeth. He faced around to Coe Neely, who was still peering into the back mirror. In the distance, *The Blue Danube* ended in a final blare, and applause rattled thinly.

The stranger fashioned up his quirly, licked it, and lighted it. Matchlight burst whitely against his cheeks.

Coe dragged his eyes from the mirror, suddenly embarrassed at being caught in the act of staring, even though it was through the medium of glass. He nodded to the stranger.

The stranger drew brightly on his cigarette, exhaled, and followed the blue smoke with his eyes until it broke away. Then he raised his eyes to Coe and, after the count of five, nodded in return.

The bartender set out sour mash. "It's a fifty-cent brand."

"Is it?" The stranger didn't care, he had a thousand dollars in his jeans. He poured evenly, and drank. "Leave the bottle."

And that was all.

Coe Neely asked for beer. He nodded to the two men farther along the bar—they were Jessup and Harris, from Gerald Hawxhurst's Tiptoe—and sipped his beer. He looked carefully around the Sucker Lode, as if he had never been in it before.

A huge owl was suspended over the back mirror in eternal take-off, its wings stiff and its eyes glassy. Above the owl was a faded, bug-specked campaign poster—*Lincoln and Union*. At the far end of the bar was a staircase that rose to a balcony, its rails polished by thousands of sweaty palms. They were the palms of the performers and, in earlier days, had been the palms of men who ascended with their lust to the small rooms off the balcony. That particular kind of entertainment, however, was no longer offered.

Coe's glance traveled downward, down to the tables and the yellow-keyed piano; down over the hats of the men at those tables; and so, inevitably, to the stranger who was brooding over his sour mash.

One of his elbows was back, thus displaying the jeweled cartridge rims of his near revolver. They were a bright and unspoken challenge to any man who chose to call it.

Abruptly he said, "Fifty cents is too high for this stuff."

The bartender raised his brows. "For mash?" He snickered in lilting falsetto. "Freight rates're too high, also."

Silence lay hard between them.

Presently Jessup and Harris stalked past the stranger to the doors. He ignored them. Then he asked, "Got a decent stable around here?"

The bartender paused. He was unaccustomed to having accusations and questions fired at him in this fashion. "You might try Ockendon's—right next door." He snickered again. "Stayin' long?"

"Long as I please." He drank his second mash, savoring it. "What's all the ruckus about?"

"Ruckus? Oh—that's the celebration, the Fourth o' July. Fireworks later. You better stay."

"Fourth of July?" The stranger pondered that, and for the first time since he had come to Fiftyfour, he smiled. It wasn't much of a smile, just a slight movement at the ends of his mouth; but it denoted some inner amusement that raced through him. "So it is, so it is." He finished his cigarette and stepped on it. "Fireworks, eh?" That really amused him. He faced around to the piano. "That thing work?"

"Sure it works. Music every night. Singin', too."

"Who sings?"

"Sweetest li'l thrush you ever saw. Jennie LaDue, her name is."

"Jennie who?"

"LaDue. She's old Chris LaDue's niece, though you wouldn't have met Chris yet. There's no family resemblance between 'em—ha-ha."

The stranger swung his shoulders around to the bar. "I like pretty little thrushes." His eyes were full on Coe Neely. "Who are you?"

Coe was caught off guard, he hadn't expected the question. He put down his glass and spoke his name.

The bartender leaned forward, anxious to please. "He's our marshal."

Something like amusement softened the stranger's stare. "Why don't you wear a badge?"

"I don't have to, everyone knows me."

From the bandstand, the smartly militant rhythms of *The Radetsky March* were echoing through the streets and bringing people's heads around. More and more of them were trailing toward the music now, eager to be in at the start of the day's program. The Omaha stage had still not arrived.

Coe looked at the dirty-faced clock on the wall: it was 1:45. "Think I'll

take a look at the festivities." He left a nickel for his beer, nodded again to the stranger, and sauntered out.

The stranger beckoned to the bartender. "Where's the library?"

The Radetzky March ended suddenly, in the middle.

"Behind the post office—across the street. It's closed today, though."

The stranger banged a dollar down, glanced once at the tables, and walked out. He walked into a growing commotion that was centered not around the bandstand but around the stage station at the end of Front Street. There was a rapid stamping of boots and hoarse yelling; everyone was moving toward the blown, baked earth of the prairie at the edge of town.

Even the green-coated bandsmen were jogging along with the crowd, all of them anxious to find out why the stage—coming in now—was so late. Beauty Brogan was bringing it in dry, yelling for greasers. There was a rolling red cloud of dust coming down the prairie, balled in front and trailing tatters behind it. It gathered speed as it came, and presently everyone could see the team horses, and an instant later could hear the splintering howl of heavy wheels.

Then it was broadside on at the bend of the trail—six horses with Beauty Brogan leaning forward to them, taut-reining them to a finish, bouncing like a gunny sack on the seat as he lined out for the station. He was standing spraddled in the boot, coattails flying, hauling back on the ribbons, his whip held like a drawn saber crosswise in front of him.

"Ho—greasers!" and he thrust back to rein in with smoke pennants streaming from his fried axles. The dust rose higher,

a filthy curtain of it; and a little Mex boy darted from the station with grease pail and brush.

Beauty wheeled in and braked and sat high above the choking backwash of his own dust, bellowing for a doctor. He belched from deep in his paunch, and the sound was like two dry shingles clapped together. He set the brake and clambered down and breast-stroked his way through the crowd to Mr. Tivers, the agent. Mr. Tivers then sent for Dr. McCall. He hustled the Beauty into his office and shut the door. The Beauty took a long tug from a bottle in the skirts of his coat and walked magnificently around the desk and slumped onto a bench.

"Out by the Gilford Fault," he explained, "where the lava ends and the road begins again. Right in them cottonwoods. Never seen such expert shootin' in my life." He blew out his breath. "He didn't throw down, never called on me to stop.

"He just popped up from the bushes an' blew the senator's face away, then popped down again. Hell, I stopped an' poked around for an hour, but he'd gone. Then ol' Evan Marsh, he come along an' helped me put Tubman's face back together—what there was of it, I mean—an' then Evan an' me, we had a few drinks, an' he helped me wrap the senator up nice an' tidy, an' that's why I'm two hours late." His next belch was like the rattle of rowels on a washboard.

Mr. Tivers couldn't assimilate it. He stroked his pet cat and repeated over and over, his voice whisper-high and spur-sharp. "Who'd want to kill Josh Tubman?"

The office door shot open and Dr. Jefferson McCall stepped in, followed

by two Mex change boys who were carrying a tarpaulin sack between them. "Over there," the doctor directed, "by the bench. Beauty, you old sot, move your big feet." The doctor bit viciously at a cigar with his molars and tore the end off. "This had to happen on the Fourth, too."

He lit the cigar with the flare of a sulphur match and left it sticking out the side of his mouth, wreathing his nostrils in smoke. Then he knelt to the sack and proceeded to unwrap it with swift, sure movements of his hands. Senator Tubman had been a tall man with considerable girth but the tarpaulin in which he was encased was flattened now, and bulging at the sides.

Mr. Tivers tugged out a handkerchief and held it to his nose. "Who'd want to kill Josh Tubman?" he breathed through the protection of soiled linen.

CHAPTER TWO

He Meets People

THE STRANGER stood by his horse in front of the Sucker Lode, smiling tight-lipped in the shadow of his hat, his eyes cut to one steel-gray gleam by it. He patted the animal's neck a few times before he unfastened the halter-hitch and, with a last look in the direction of the stage station, led it next door into Ockendon's Stables.

The stranger's name was Tracy Silleck, and trailside murder was nothing new to him. He had received his front name from his mother's people in the wilderness of a distant territory, and logically it had been shortened to Trace during his boyhood. But that boyhood was thirty years past, now, and few people knew him as anything but Tracy—and very few there were who could call him that.

He had never been in Fiftyfour before, but in adjacent regions he was remembered with—variously—loathing, fear, and cool disinterest.

Ockendon's Stables were empty, for everyone had rushed to the stage station; so Tracy Silleck put up his horse himself, rubbed it and fed it. Then he returned to the saloon for lunch.

By three o'clock, the band was playing again and the holiday crowd was straggling back to the area, depressed in spirit but determined to go through with the program, dead senator or not. As old Chris LaDue remarked, the day was in honor of patriots long-departed, and one more wouldn't make much difference.

Coe Neely met Mildred Lane on the outskirts of the crowd and told her all that he knew: a person or persons unknown had killed Senator Tubman from the side of the road with a rifle bullet, then vanished.

"An old feud?" she suggested. "Sometimes, when a man comes to power in the West, he leaves tar behind." Her thoughts went to three of the biggest powers in the region: Gerald Hawxhurst, John Hansford, and Lester Royce.

"Not Tubman. His past was clean, so far as anyone knows."

And so they stood, listening to Rauschenbach's Brass Band, waiting for the fireworks to start. Coe had sent a wire to the United States Marshal in Omaha, and there was little he could do until the answer came.

Suddenly Chris LaDue yelped and grabbed someone and pushed him around. That someone was the hard-shaven stranger, his flat-crowned hat drawn low against his face, his surprised eyes more terrible than if they had been narrowed in hate.

"Caught yuh!" Chris pushed helplessly on Tracy Silleck's ungiving arm. "Marshal Neely!"

Silleck's eyes closed to normal and he threw Chris's hands off. "Don't be a damn fool."

Chris flung a finger at him. "You were jostlin' Jim Eversole!"

Gerald Hawxhurst stepped up with Coe. "Did he steal anything?"

"He was tryin' to!" Chris, having started a case, had to build it up.

Coe Neely said, "You heard what my watcher said. What do you say?"

Silleck shook his head slightly. "I never explain, and I never apologize. The only answer to this half-wit is this." He seized Chris so forcefully that the old man's shirt tore. He lifted his open hand and struck so fast and so hard that the banging sound of the slap brought a gasp from those who saw it. He struck again, then pitched Chris from him.

Hawxhurst murmured something to Mildred, and took her elbow. She wanted to leave, but she also wanted to see how Coe Neely would face up to this. It was the word of an erratic oldster against the denial of a man who did not have the appearance or the gestures of a pocket thief.

Neely asked Eversole, "You want to file a complaint?"

"Don't do it," Hawxhurst said quickly. "He didn't take your wallet, did he?"

"No," Eversole admitted reluctantly; "I still got it." He was a thickset, sandy-haired man who had a small herd south of town.

A negative groan went up from the witnesses. While it was apparently true that this dark-hatted stranger was not a thief, it was equally true that he had

hit LaDue so ferociously and so spitefully as to suggest that such action was pleasurable to him, and had not been prompted by hasty anger at a wrongful accusation.

Hawxhurst started to escort Mildred away. James Eversole blocked Silleck's path, breathing hard. "Why don't you beat up someone in your own class?"

Tracy Silleck appraised him with a glance. "Like you?" He lifted a dusty boot and with a sharp stab shoved it into Eversole's chest and knocked him backward. Eversole staggered wildly and tripped over a picnic box and collapsed onto his shoulderblades, legs thrashing.

People picked him up; the crowd closed in menacingly behind Coe. Then Silleck's hand flicked to his holster and he had a .44 out.

"I was accused of stealing a man's wallet. That man himself denied it. That ends the matter."

He fired into a green-painted bench, leaving a white split in its front slat; spun the .44 with contemptuous grace, caught it and holstered it. And before anyone could speak, he was striding past Berry's refreshment tent, heading for the Sucker Lode.

Coe whirled to face the crowd, hands up to prevent an outbreak. He was looking directly into Mildred Lane's upturned eyes, and she was not liking what she saw. She slipped an arm through Hawxhurst's.

"Come on, Gerry, let's take a long walk."

TRACY SILLECK neither saw nor heard that; he was too intent upon suppressing his initial fury. He leaned on the bend of the bar where Coe Neely had been standing earlier, and ordered sour mash.

A wretched melancholy was clouding

his ash-gray eyes, settling into his gaunted features, saddening him. It seemed that he was doing always things he didn't want to do, letting his temper spark like a sulphur match, then regaining control of it only when it was too late. That poor old man—and the angry redhead—and the kid marshal. The kid was too new to his job.

He looked up from his drink. "Bar-keep, any of the brands around here signing on?"

"Riders?" The bartender was made nervous by this man.

"I wasn't referring to bank clerks."

"Course." The bartender wiped wet rings from the woodwork. "Well, the big ones—like the Tiptoe an' the Jingle-foot an' the Double Diamond—they're cuttin' down. The cattle business is bad right now, an' I guess it'll stay bad 'til the railroad comes."

Silleck's face lighted with fresh interest. "What's bad about it?"

"Well." The bartender shrugged; he did not wish to appear as a sage in the presence of cattlemen-customers. "Nesters are movin' in, stringin' fence. Homesteadin', you know. Small ranchers. They're"—he dropped his voice—"stealin' from the big outfits, some of 'em."

"Rustling?"

"Well—" The bartender didn't like to use that word.

Tracy Silleck, holding his glass to his lips, caught Dr. McCall's eye for an instant. The doctor was sitting with Mr. Tivers, the stage agent, at a rear table under the clock. Other men stood at the bar with their knees bent above the rail, talking desultorily.

Holding his glass to his lips, Tracy Silleck distinctly heard the doctor say, "It was a Winchester forty-four-forty, center-fire bottleneck. It crashed right

through the senator's face and into his brain, where, I might add, it lodged, thus preserving the back of his head."

Silleck lowered his glass and refilled it. "Who," he inquired of the bartender, "was this senator?"

"Josh Tubman. Fine man. He was comin' here to speak."

"About what?"

"Well, about the Fourth, an' about that homestead bill he was supportin', that'd parcel out a lot of rangeland to the small folks." The bartender simpered. "More votes there, I guess, than with the few big outfits."

The dusk of the street was brightened suddenly with a crimson wash of light that wavered unsteadily, then faded, dulled, and died.

"Rockets," the bartender explained.

A cheer sounded faintly from the end of town. The doors of the Sucker Lode flapped open and a thin man wearing an eyeshade and bombazine sleeveguards peered in.

"Is Coe Neely here?" He held up a sheet of yellow foolscap. "Got a wire for him."

"Try the fireworks."

The telegraph operator ducked out hurriedly. Tracy Silleck finished his drink and paid. "What times does this Jennie girl sing?"

"'Bout nine o'clock. You better come an' hear her." The bartender winked.

"Maybe I will," Silleck went out with his elbows extended and his hands held in toward his holsters. But there was no immediate danger in the street; everyone was out watching the fireworks.

Silleck walked past Ockendon's Stables and crossed to the post office and noted the tiny side entrance that led to the library. A sign lettered in black and gold told him that the hours were

9-12 and 1-5 daily except Sundays and holidays.

He stood there for a few minutes, arms loose at his sides, chin raised. An elderly couple walked past, talking animatedly about the fine pyrotechnics and isn't it too bad about that poor senator and we'd better leave tomorrow and . . . Silleck watched them trudge on toward Berry's Rooms. He was still watching them when another couple came past, and he stepped out to the plankwalk and touched his hat brim.

"Pardon, sir, but I wish to thank you for speaking up for me this afternoon."

Gerald Hawxhurst regarded him closely in the sallow lights of an adjacent store. "Ah yes—the man who was accused of lifting Jim Eversole's wallet. Nothing to it, of course."

"No. My name's Tracy." He waited, having given a clue.

"Mine's Hawxhurst, and this is Miss Lanc. Miss Lanc is our librarian here."

"Indeed?"

Hawxhurst touched his mustaches with a curled finger. "I mention that because you're standing in front of it."

They nodded all around, and then Hawxhurst led Mildred on to Berry's. Silleck waited in the deep shadow beside the post office, thumbs hooked into his belting, weight back on his heels. He knew the girl now, had been introduced to her, and he could figure how to handle it from here on in.

The faint contempt that he held for all men extended to women, an attitude of which he was proud; but he would never admit to himself that with each additional conquest, each further violation of morality, his hunger increased. He liked a tussle, a flurry of savage animal resistance; and then an equally savage conquest.

Hawxhurst didn't come back past the post office, so Silleck abandoned his position and returned to the Sucker Lode. It was full now, the piano was briskly threading out a tune and men were three-deep at the bar. Dr. McCall and Mr. Tivers had left but their places had been taken by two other men who wore the heavy watch chains and the glaring rings that come with success in the cattle business.

Coe Neely was suddenly at Silleck's elbow, saying, "That's John Hansford and Lester Royce. They run big outfits."

Silleck kept looking at them. "Why tell me?"

"Because we like visitors to our fair city to have work. We don't encourage drifters."

Silleck faced him then. "Does that describe me?"

"So far, it does."

Silleck held onto the rags of his black temper. He tried to smile when he said, "You're a pretty fresh kid, aren't you?" But the smile didn't come.

"I wasn't hired to be nice."

"Are you suggesting that I leave town?"

Coe Neely smiled. "You have two chances not to leave—at that table under the clock. Good night."

The piano trilled on, rollicking through the hubbub of talk and clinking glassware and harsh laughter. Standing there, Tracy Silleck got the impression that Hansford and Royce were studying him, though neither was looking directly at him.

Presently he went over to them and said, "My name's Tracy. I'm a top rider and I'm looking for work."

Hansford and Royce regarded him with expressionless faces. Hansford was a saturnine man with long white mustaches.

Royce was round-faced and sported a gray goatee. It was Hansford who said, "Business is bad, Mr. Tracy. Where did you come from?"

"Omaha. I've been sick." He clamped his back teeth down on a smile.

Lester Royce played with his glass, shoving it around and around in little circles on the tabletop. "Where are you staying?"

"There's only one place, isn't there?"

"The Indian Queen—unless you prefer the stable loft." Royce shook his head a few times, as if he were smelling something bad but couldn't locate it. "You may hear from us."

Silleck nodded curtly. He was beginning to like this town. He wondered, as he went booting toward the hotel, who had hired him to come to it.

CHAPTER THREE

He Reads Books

MONDAY MORNING'S SUNLIGHT lay in brittle yellow shafts across the polished floor of the tiny library. Mildred Lane, dressed now in tight-waisted cotton with muttonchop sleeves, looked up expectantly when the door opened. Nine o'clock chimed from the post office beyond the partition.

Mildred had been expecting Coe Neely and she tried not to show her disappointment when she saw the man Tracy.

He removed his hat and advanced slowly toward her, spurs dragging and clinking. "Miss Lane?" His eyes did not drop to her breasts, as most men's did; they remained fixed on her eyes. There was something compelling and hypnotic about them.

"Good morning, Mr. Tracy. You'd like a book?"

"I might." He stood staring down at her, running his hat brim through his cleanly-muscled fingers, around and around. "Did you attend the senator's funeral yesterday?"

"Yes, Mr. Hawxhurst and Mr. Neely took me. I didn't see you there."

"I don't like funerals."

He faced around to the wall rack and cast an eye along the titles. There was *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville and two novels by Mrs. Craik and most of Fenimore Cooper and all of Washington Irving. Also, Audubon's *American Birds* and a *History of Tom Bone County*. . .

Silleck tucked his hat under his arm, took one long stride, and reached for the *History of Tom Bone County*. Keeping his wide shoulders squarely to Mildred, he riffled the pages back and forth until he found what he had come for. It was an envelope with the single word *Tracy* penciled on it in block letters.

He swallowed sandily, flicked the envelope into his shirt pocket, and continued to riffle the pages. After a while he closed the book and replaced it on the rack. "Kind of dull, that one."

Mildred was working on her *Fines Due* register. She hadn't noticed what he had done, or how long he had been standing there.

"We have some others on the opposite rack. You'll find Defoe there—*Robinson Crusoe*, you know—and we have—"

"I guess not today." He was passing his hat brim through his palms again, eyeing her without expression. "That's a pretty brooch you're wearing."

Her hand flew to it. "This one? It's just imitation."

He shook his head. "There's nothing imitation about you, Miss Lane."

"Why, Mr. Tracy!" Her expression of mock surprise was not real, but her feeling of inner pleasure was. The way he said it had impressed her, yet had alerted her. She knew men fairly well, she'd been born west of the Missouri. This man, she guessed, was a machine of sorts—a smooth and efficient machine running on momentum.

"Maybe you'd ride out with me sometime. Ockendon has some nice rigs."

"Why I—I—"

She never completed the sentence, because he was gone.

He slunk back to the Indian Queen, purring to himself at the success of his first strike. At least, she hadn't said no. He went up to his room on the second floor, unlocked the door, kicked it open, and stood aside until he was sure that no one was in there. Then he entered, kicked the door shut, and locked it. He sat on the bed, cut open the envelope with a hard thumb and caught the money that slipped out: ten one-hundred-dollar bills.

He read the note, which was penciled in the same block letters as his name: *Very pretty work on the senator. Stay in town and pretend you're looking for work. Be seen with people as much as possible for alibi. Now we'll really start some fireworks, with fees varying according to importance of persons involved. Moby Dick today or tomorrow.*

He put the money in his pocket, struck a lucifer, and burned both envelope and note in the washbowl. He took off his hat, slipped out of his boots, and stretched out on the bed with both hands beside him, resting against his holsters.

He thought about himself, as he had been doing frequently of late.

He realized that he had become two

men, one that betrayed him and one that was impelled to excuse the betrayal. He fought back eternally for the fragment of decency that must be left in him somewhere, and when he couldn't find it he apologized for the search. But the conflict within him kept him at swords' points with himself, causing a stiffness of soul that ached with the desire to have it limber again. He felt, in moments such as this, like a man committed to dyeing his beard who hates his dishonesty for the lie, but who is helpless to face the ridicule of exposure.

He loathed the thought of what he had become, so he deliberately adhered to it in the faint hope that ultimately, in his own twisted way, he might become proud of it. He killed, he drank he seduced—trying to slap the lie into the teeth of the civilization that had whelped him, for contempt of its stupidity. For his gods were the gods that had been spawned in violence by this simmering land, to feed upon the flesh and the souls of mankind. He knew no others, nor cared to seek them out . . .

He concentrated on Mildred Lane.

There was a clean flow of well-scrubbed health to her, like the first breath of an autumn dawn, and there was fine laughter in her. She was slender in the flank, the way he liked them, and she had small young breasts and a supple carriage. He approved of those things, too.

Footsteps were approaching his door from the corridor outside. They hesitated, stopped. A knock fell. He was off the bed and into his boots in one smooth motion.

"Who is it?"

"Neely. Open up."

Coe stepped in and shut the door quietly. Tracy Silleck sat on the bed

and waited. For a crazy instant he imagined that the marshal might be communicating with him by means of the library; then he dismissed that conjecture and thought, *If he makes trouble, I can drop him and slide out the window and reach the stables before anyone knows about it. . . .*

"This is an honor, Marshal. I guess you'll want to search my room for weapons."

"I don't have to," Coe Neely folded his arms and leaned back against the door. "I heard you were taking an interest in literature."

"Was I?"

"So I've been told. What I came to tell you was—confine your interests to literature when you're in that library."

Silleck felt a great throb of amusement pulse through him. This Neely was too new, too impetuous—a deaf man waltzing to blind music.

"Why, Marshal, you don't think I'd go around town stealing women, do you?"

"I didn't say that."

Silleck stood up. "You didn't have to. About Miss Lane, now—I haven't noticed any halter on her."

"Here's her halter—here." Coe thumped his chest. "Remember that, Tracy."

Silleck was laughing inwardly, holding it in his stomach so that his belt buckle shook slightly. "Don't pull too hard—you might draw in Hawxhurst." He braced himself.

Coe Neely swung twice—left and right—and waded in to follow up. But Silleck wasn't there; he was dancing noiselessly away. Coe shot forward from sprung knees and swung wildly and missed again and collided with the chair that Silleck twisted against his legs. He had to grab the chair or else

go down, so he grabbed the chair and that was when Silleck hit him—a quick horizontal cross that took him on the side of the skull and almost broke his neck.

Then Silleck clapped one hand on Coe's neckerchief and one hand on the seat of his trousers and propelled him to the door and through it and out into the corridor.

"You'll be all right, kid, as long as you don't interfere with men's affairs. Now beat it out of here."

Silleck was back in his room before Coe could collect himself, and by that time it was too late to start it all over again. He felt foolish and embarrassed and helpless, and he was monstrously glad that no one had seen what had happened. He didn't believe that anyone had seen it, at least; and he carried that negative belief contentedly out of the hotel with him.

He could see Tracy again later, on official business. The U.S. Marshal had authorized him by telegraph from Omaha to conduct an investigation into Senator Tubman's murder pending the arrival of the marshal himself, who was infirm with summer complaint.

THE PERSON WHO HAD SEEN Silleck propel Neely into the corridor was Lester Royce, who had heard the commotion from a room at the end of the hall. Royce did not live at the Indian Queen, nor did the two men in the room with him; but they often used it for the discussions which sometimes became necessary when all three were in Fiftyfour at the same time together.

Royce's Jinglefoot was forty miles south, John Hansford's Double Diamond was almost sixty miles due northwest, and Gerald Hawxhurst's Tiptoe was fifty-odd miles east. So it was easier to

discuss their mutual affairs in town than to visit back and forth on the respective home ranches.

Hawxhurst looked up sharply when Royce closed the door. "What was the trouble?"

"That man Tracy—he just threw Coe Neely out."

Old John Hansford placed a horny palm over his white mustaches and ruffled them. "Millie Lane, I'll bet."

"I won't take your money." Royce sat down. "And speaking of money . . ."

None of them spoke for a long time. They sat and toyed with the jeweled lodge charms of their breed, and bit hard on their stumpy cigars. Two of them—Royce and Hansford—were well over sixty and their youths had been spent in varying degrees of violence. But each of them knew, though neither would admit it, that 1885 was no longer a frontier year, and that they were not frontiersmen but businessmen. The vast distances surrounding Fiftyfour were the grassy shops where they prepared their wares for sale, and Fiftyfour was where they arranged to ship them away to market. A railroad was being built, the head-of-track wasn't too far from town right now; and when that arrived they would probably have a voice in its control, too.

Call them gamblers, profiteers of their century, with few morals and exceedingly quiet consciences. But they had been here when the first great herds drifted up from Texas, and they fashioned the land into their own images with blood-stained fists, and they had laid their cash on the line.

John Hansford tested the other two with "I've got a damned good notion to sell out."

"Sell out?" Gerald Hawxhurst's nostrils stiffened. "Hell, I say let's fight

these nesters, these 'steaders." He frowned at Hansford with lofty disdain.

Lester Royce stubbed his wet cigar into the butt-choked ash tray in front of him. "You use the wrong tense, Gerry. We're already fighting them."

"How?"

"There'll be no Tubman Act for redistribution of the land—at least for quite a while." He shrugged irritably. "Even so, the nesters are stringing fence and rustling strays, just the same." He shrugged again, more irritably.

Hansford smoothed his ruffled white mustaches with fingers that were gunstock brown. "It's too bad about Josh Tubman, because murder isn't a nice thing. But he's been murdered." Hansford tapped out the rest of his words on the table: "The point being, as soon as any nesters are killed, it goes from simple murder to complicated warfare."

Gerald Hawxhurst pursed his lips at the ceiling. "Seems we've ridden this fence before, gentlemen. We're right back where we were an hour ago. So let's go over it once more: all three of us had business in Omaha last week, for good and sufficient reasons. One of us—or maybe two—got in touch with this man Tracy unbeknownst to the other—or others—and arranged to have Josh Tubman removed."

Lester Royce snaked out a plump hand to a bottle and poured and drank, all in one continuous motion. "Keep talking."

"Tracy's now hanging around town waiting for further business, but he doesn't know who it's coming from—only that it's coming. If he hadn't been promised further business, he wouldn't have risked being seen in town. The

Man From Hell, they call a professional killer. Well, I say let's send this one back there." And Gerald Hawxhurst poured a stiff drink for himself and swigged it off.

"Gentlemen," he went on, "I wish to go on record right now: I don't go to church, I like my drinks, and I have an eye for the ladies. But I am not a murderer. If we can't handle encroachments on free range by ourselves, then we have no right to call in someone to do it for us." He spoke simply and forcefully.

John Hansford's long mouth was sagging at the corners. He was more saturnine than ever. "I say, let's play it as dealt. It's either us, who've made our lives here, or the nesters, the intruders." He wagged an admonishing finger. "I don't take to hiring a man to do my killing for me; I've always done it myself. But I'm willing to ride with this a ways, just to see how things come out." He sat back, watching the effect of his offer.

Royce, who could be guided by Hansford in most things, was warming slightly.

"I saw Tracy come out of the library when I was on my way here this morning, and he was holding one arm across his shirt like he'd found something important. Now, a man like Tracy isn't going to read books all day, and if he has any courting instincts, he's going to follow them at night. All I can deduce is that the contact point here in town is in that library—in a book, say, or in some shelf."

He cut and lit a fresh cigar, letting his deduction sink in. "So I suggest, in furtherance of John's proposal, that each of us visit the library every day, at a different time, and at least open and close a book. That way, we'll all have

our fingers in the possible pie. If the library isn't the contact point, it won't make any difference. If it is the contact point, then things will go along as—ah—desired, and there'll be no guilt on any of us. We'd all better stay right here in town for a couple of weeks—hanging together, as the saying goes."

Hawxhurst narrowed his eyes at Hansford, who was staring at Royce. Then Hawxhurst shook his head gravely. "It's still murder."

John Hansford said quietly, "Hawxhurst, you've got to realize something: this is war. Consider that we're the politicians directing it, and that Tracy's the army that's actually fighting it. Will that make you feel any better?" His words were edged with contempt.

"When do we start our reading habits?"

"This afternoon."

Hawxhurst whacked his palms together and glared at Hansford. "Deal me in."

They rose and shook hands all around with the self-conscious eagerness of men who, having met briefly for the first time, are now about to part company but who plan to meet again soon. Hansford went out first, then Royce, and lastly Hawxhurst.

Royce and Hawxhurst collided with Hansford, who had stopped short in the middle of the corridor. What had stopped him was the sight of Tracy Silleck descending the stairs to the lobby. Hansford turned and whispered behind his hand:

"Do you reckon he heard us?"

Tracy Silleck had not heard them, and even if he had, he would not have recognized any one particular voice. On the landing, he glanced back casually and saw the three standing there—old Hansford, rotund Royce, and florid

Hawxhurst. Then he went on down to the lobby.

It's queer, he thought as he crossed to the Sucker Lode for lunch, *how things happen in this business. One week you're in Omaha keeping quiet between jobs; and the next week you're in a cowtown that's built around a surveyor's fix of fifty-four degrees, and you have almost two thousand dollars in your pocket and the promise of more to come.*

... You're in Omaha, riding your reputation easy-like and cautious so that while no man is likely to harm you, any man who wants to do business with you can find you. And such a man does find you by leaving a message with a bartender, asking you to select a certain volume from the library and look for an offer. You do that, and there's the offer with a suggestion of future employment to boot. You leave an answering note, and when you return next day you find half the payment for the first job—one thousand dollars—with instructions on how to pick up the other half in a *History of Tom Bone County*, which is in the little library at Fiftyfour. Then you knock off the job—a simple trailside shot in bright sunlight—and here you are in Fiftyfour with a pretty girl to help pass the idle hours and the bartender of the Sucker Lode in front of you asking what you want. . . .

"Sour mash as usual," Silleck said.

A door behind the balcony opened and a girl in a flowered kimono came out and leaned on the top of the banister. "Neddie!" The bartender squinted upward. "Neddie, see if you can fix me a lemon squash—with ice, if you have any left." She nodded to Tracy Silleck—an impersonal inclining of her chin—and returned to her room, clutching

her kimono tightly about her uncorseted body.

"Before you grow any lemons," Tracy said, "who's that?"

"That's Jennie LaDue, the singer. Chris LaDue's niece, though there's no—ha-ha—family resemblance."

"You said that before, and now I believe you." Silleck finished his drink with one eye raised to the balcony, but Jennie LaDue did not reappear. He considered taking the lemon squash up to her, then rejected the idea. He wasn't much of a daylight man.

He strolled out, trailing smoke, and crossed to the library. Mildred Lane was about to close up for the noon hour, and Silleck said he'd be back. She offered to stay open if he wanted a particular book, but he said no, he'd like to walk her home.

They walked to Berry's Rooms together. She said, "I'd ask you in for lunch, but I'm not sure if there'll be a place at the table or not."

"Ask me in after we get back from that ride." He took her as far as the steps of the veranda. "Thanks, I accept."

"Why—" unaccountably she was smiling and nodding—"I'd love to go."

At three o'clock that afternoon, Silleck entered the library and began browsing through the pages of *Moby Dick*. After a few minutes he told Mildred, "I'd like to harpoon a whale sometime."

"Have you ever been to sea?"

"I'm all at sea now." He closed the book, having found some words that Herman Melville never wrote. "But learning can be fun."

"A lot of people seem to think so. Why, only today three of the biggest ranchers in the county dropped in."

"The cow business must be slack."

"It's those nesters," she said. "They're putting their own brands on the strays, and some people say there won't be enough big beef left by autumn to make a shipment worthwhile. Although of course, the nesters have rights, too."

"They do?" He was grinning at her, twirling his hat on a forefinger.

She was beginning to like him. There was something almost winsome to him when he dropped his shield of aloofness, some sadness that strangely appealed to her.

"Don't you think they do?"

"Let's decide that tomorrow night—when we take our ride." He put on his hat as he went out, leaving her for the second time that day with no reply to the same suggestion.

Back in his room at the Indian Queen, he read the note that he had found in the pages of *Moby Dick*: *James Eversole is worth \$500 to Audubon's American Birds.*

That was all, but it was enough.

CHAPTER FOUR

He Kills in Fear

THE SUCKER LODGE was a busy place that evening. Oil flames danced in a score of lamps. Noise and smoke and laughter swirled around Silleck's shoulders; the place smelled of sweat and humanity.

Then Jennie stepped onto the balcony, trussed in silver sequins and carrying a black boa. She was a tall woman, cold in manner and with a glance that was filled with scorn for overt masculine lust.

The laughter stopped, the noises grew small. The piano rocked into some opening chords and she descended the stairway slowly, singing as she came, her slippers feeling over the

crooked steps below and ahead. And as she sang, her green eyes drifted slowly about the crowded room, passing like a shadow across the upturned faces. They met with those of Tracy Silleck and for an instant they paused—but only for an instant. Then they passed on.

Her song ended on the bottom step, and there was shouting and cheering and the sound of rough hands beating together. They wanted more and they called for more. Men stood and offered their chairs. Jennie smiled and walked between them or around them, accepting nothing. Later, after the fifth or sixth song, when coins were being offered, she would make her acceptances.

Tracy Silleck grinned tight-lipped at her. The sequined waist of her glimmering gown was held closely to her own slim one and her hair was indecently smooth and clean with the high sheen of spun metal to it. The lithe column of her body was a tan flame in the silver smoke of that gown.

When Silleck grinned, which wasn't often, his eyelids moved close together and the lights came out of them in bright streaks. Now, watching that gown, he was thinking of a harpoon.

She measured him coolly. "You're the new boy in school, aren't you?"

"At the head of the class."

All the men in the room were looking at them, and they both knew and were thrilling to it. At heart, Jennie LaDue was too amiable to become predatory, although she had the requisite equipment. She preferred to sing for her money, flattering lonely old cattlemen and inflaming their honest natural instincts to a low boil—no more. She supported herself and she helped to support her Uncle Chris and that, for the time being, was sufficient for her.

Someday she planned to buy a piece of a ranch or a partnership in a saloon, and settle down. But not yet—not while life still offered her something.

Upon occasion she had loved without restraint, awarding her favors to a man who had left her for fresher horizons; that had hardened her, but it had not shriveled her. Strangers in town sometimes made a mistake about her, and got their errant faces clawed, or slapped. She preferred to confer her passing gifts upon older men of her acquaintance because the younger ones were all alike in their greed.

Except this one, who seemed different. "At the head of the class?" she repeated.

"Star pupil," Tracy told her. He didn't have much time that night; there was work to be done. "You look warm. How about some fresh air?"

They went out the side door, savoring the overt looks that followed them. The hot sky was hosed with a fine spray of stars and the first flake of the moon was low on the horizon, hung with mists.

Jennie was sharply revealed.

She represented a torture to Tracy Silleck, because there was the smell of satisfaction about her, an aura of frills girding her body—the things he loved but could never have. His sensation was laced with the need to inflict physical cruelty on her, to bruise her flesh somehow in a mockery of the act of love. He was torn between his impulse to possess her for his pleasure and his even stronger desire to hurt her in ugly fashion.

She represented a force against which he had struggled since boyhood. It was nothing clearly remembered—only the outer world of men and women at large, the vast multitude of breathing,

guiltless humans whom he had finally chosen to despise and to whose destruction he had at last become committed.

A sudden impulse toward immediate possession sent his hand to her wrist. Slowly the clasp of his fingers tightened and he drew her to him. "Come here to me, Little Brightbreast."

"Oh God—let me go!"

Roughly he demanded, "Why'd you come out here?"

She was getting frightened; she was unable to reach inside of him and steal an ounce of kindness, as she had always been able to do with everyone else.

"You're hurting me."

"You've already hurt me." He forced his mouth down against hers and grasped her around the waist.

She cocked a knee into his stomach and pressed; she beat his face and head with her free arm. She tried to shout, but his mouth was smothering hers.

A hoarse cry sounded from Ockendon's and old Chris LaDue shuffled toward them in the half-light of the alley.

"What you doin'?"

Silleck, his fingers deep in Jennie's mussed hair, released her mouth and lowered her. "Beat it, gramps."

"What you doin'?" Chris was trembling with rage.

Jennie picked up the hem of her gown and ran like a deer back into the Sucker Lode. Tracy Silleck straightened his hat and hitched up his belt-ings.

"Beat it, gramps. I fanned your jaws once and I don't want to do it again." He brushed roughly past the old man and went into Ockendon's and took his horse.

Five minutes later he was riding out of town by its north end, trotting through

the moonlight in the general direction of the Gilford Fault. It didn't occur to him to look back once he had cleared town, because he supposed that no one had seen him leave.

But Chris LaDue had, and Chris was following him now, astride a tired stable hack with a braided halter and no saddle at all. Chris kept a long interval between them, holding more to the walk than the trot. He was working for Coe Neely, in the sense that Coe always did him small favors in return for various chores; and Coe, who was Chris's friend, was puzzled and curious about Tracy and so, therefore, must Chris be puzzled and curious.

For the next hour he trailed Silleck through underbush and over flinty ledges, across a succession of dismal slopes and along rocky crests. They were entering the lava beds now, and the going was treacherous. Once Tracy Silleck turned around and Chris almost died. But instantly Silleck rode on again, apparently reassured.

The image of what might lay ahead distracted him. He conjured up the picture of a huge band of outlaws, each armed with a .44-40 Winchester center-fire, waiting for Silleck's orders. Moonlight can play tricks with the imagination, especially when the mind is old, and Chris's reflections became distorted by fear. But still he rode north onto the Gilford Fault, seeking to forward the interests of his friend Coe Neely.

It had never entered Chris's head to summon the marshal; he had acted impulsively when, from the alley, he had seen Silleck take his horse and leave. Coe Neely, he knew, was in dalliance with Mildred Lane on the veranda of Berry's Rooms, and wouldn't want to be disturbed by anything so commonplace as a man going for a ride.

He had other thoughts, other images. If he could find a whole army of outlaws, he thought, he would report it to Coe and share the glory with him. Just how he and Coe would subdue this army did not concern him; he was thinking already of the praise, tasting the fame. He'd buy a present for Jennie, who'd been so kind to him. He'd buy a present so big she would never have to work again, never have to sing into the lustful faces of half-drunken men.

The sharp rap of steel on stone caused him to lift his eyes. Ahead in the purple-silver shadows was Silleck's horse, standing on three legs with reins looping to the ground.

Tracy Silleck's shadowy figure was a few feet beyond, kneeling in the rocks, his back to Chris LaDue. He was lifting stones aside and slinging them out of the way.

Chris pegged his stable hack and stole forward, mouth held open to relieve the pressure in his ears, fingers trailing the ground ahead of him. At the crouch he crept forward, head cocked to one side, eyes staring fixedly at the man who was pulling stones loose and pitching them aside.

The thought of gold occurred to Chris. But there was no gold out here, only stratified rock. Cash, maybe. Silleck had a fat wallet. Maybe there was cash here, or jewels. Diamonds for Jennie!

Chris stopped behind a fringe of sage and knelt, getting his breath. Ahead, between him and Silleck, there was only loose shale—no more bushes or large rocks for concealment. He could advance no farther, but he could see what was happening fifty feet away.

Tracy Silleck had lifted a heavy oil-skin roll from its place of concealment,

and was unbuckling it. Presently gun-blue steel and polished woodwork shone in the misty moonlight. The clack of metal on wood came loudly. The Winchester took shape.

Chris leaned forward, watching Silleck test the breeching. This was a discovery, a thing that was starkly believable in the moonlight. Then Chris's knee nudged loose a pebble; it bounded and skipped down the shale.

Silleck jerked his head in the direction of the noise. Chris half-rose and turned, wanting only to get away. Something knocked the breath from his lungs; that was all he ever knew. Something struck him across the back with terrible force.

It made him gulp for air. He tried to call Jennie before he tumbled a million miles into final blackness, and in fact he did utter a J sound, low and pitiful. The echoes of the shot bounced away across the night, racketing on and on through the darkness.

Tracy Silleck picked his way up the slope, rifle held ready. He had fired instinctively in reaction to sudden alarm. A prowler had been closing on him, so he had spoken the only warning he knew. The vague notion of Coe Neely crossed his mind; but when he reached the body he knew that he had killed Coe's watcher instead. The frail old body was spread among the trampled sage in flat disarray.

Silleck shook his head wearily. He hadn't wanted to kill Chris LaDue. Nor had he wanted to kill a lot of men that he had killed. But after the second or third, it had been easy—the only way of life open to him, it seemed. But those had been for cash; this was wanton. Suddenly he was possessed of a repugnance he had never felt before. His stomach roiled within him. He wanted to vomit.

No spade would be needed; the wolves would come down from the ledges soon and talk around this lonely body. The buzzards, too, would be out in full force when daylight came.

Silleck disassembled the rifle, wrapped it again in the oilskin roll, and strapped the roll behind his cante. He stepped into his stirrup and swung his bits south toward the place just beyond Fiftyfour where James Eversole ran a claim.

After he attended to Eversole, he would conceal the rifle again, this time in a different spot. He had buried it here in the Gilford Fault after killing Senator Tubman, but now it was time for a change. He knew that his room at the Indian Queen had been searched by now, and searched thoroughly. But no rifle had been found, so he was beyond suspicion, for a while at least.

He thought idly of Mildred Lane as he rode. He had a date with her tomorrow night. He'd be five hundred dollars richer by then, and feeling that much stronger. Unconsciously he'd been comparing her with Jennie LaDue. Jennie was more his kind than Mildred, but Mildred was more desirable. Jennie reminded him of the only girl he had ever loved—a tall young girl with smoky green eyes who had eventually sent him packing—but Mildred was like the girl he had always wanted to love. . . .

So his thoughts ran as he rode through the dying moonlight to James Eversole's claim south of Fiftyfour. He barely recalled that Eversole was a sandy-haired man with bent shoulders—a man who two days before, on the Fourth of July, had asked him why he didn't beat up someone in his own class, and who had received a kick in the stomach for his pains.

Well, they'd meet again, and Eversole would still be way out of his class.

CHAPTER FIVE

He Kills for Hire

JAMES EVERSOLE stepped into the pre-dawn mists of this new day and walked to his barn, whistling between his teeth. He was going to hitch the buckboard and drive into Fiftyfour with a load of beef for local sale, and then he was going to eat a dollar lunch at the Indian Queen Hotel. After that, he would return home with a month's supply of groceries, new spools of fencing wire, and a patented post-hole digger.

He cared not a whit that those items would be bought with the proceeds of beef that had been stolen from among strays and butchered for the purpose. His conscience had surrendered under the weight of his reasoning that he was a small independent defending himself against the big interests.

"An Amahrkin pie-neer," he liked to tell his shaving mirror, "standin' kneedeep in hawg-slop with m' rahfle speakin' for m' conscience."

Back in Missouri, he had prospered mildly as a farmer; but tales of big money to be garnered farther west had caused him to sell out and cross the horizon. His fences stung the big ranchers just as smartly as if the barbs had become snagged in their flesh, and thus he had been marked for extinction.

His own small herd was close-held in a box corral next to the barn, and on this morning he decided to let it drift down into the lower pasture before he went to town, thereby saving his wife the chore. The herd was scrubby and lean, but Eversole was proud of it. It

represented the start of his climb to wealth and affluence, and be damned to the methods by which he arrived.

He opened the gate to let his cattle out, still whistling between his teeth. Unlike Chris LaDue, he heard the shot that killed him. Falling over the gate onto his face, twitching convulsively, he was conscious of his cattle stirring with alarm. He lay odd-angled in the churned mud of the run, and never felt his wife's hands nor heard her voice.

She heard the fading beat of flying hoofs and rose to find them, but the mists were too thick and she saw nothing. Then she sank onto her husband's body, sobbing.

COE NEELY HEARD Benjamin Bristow out. It was now midmorning and hot, and Bristow kept swabbing his forehead with a neckerchief as he talked. The Widow Eversole, sitting in a corner of the marshal's office, was unable to speak at all through her tight sorrow.

Bristow's words were wrapped in the accents of Kentucky. "We were neighbors, Jim an' me. Neighbors by eight mile, anyway, which is pretty close." He was a big-shouldered man with a big, freckled head. He wasn't handy with words.

"Go on," Coe prompted. He flipped and caught the punched cartridge casing that Bristow had found in back of Eversole's barn. It was a Winchester .44-40, center-fire, shaped like a bottle-neck.

Bristow swabbed his face again. "Sometime after chores this mornin', Martha here come bangin' up on the buckboard an' 'lowed as how Jim had been shot. I went to her place with her, and he surely had been." He glanced helplessly at her. "So we packed him

into Doc McCall's with us, then come straight here." He blew his nose, rested his weight on one leg, and stayed silent.

Martha Eversole raised her face from the crumpled dampness of her handkerchief. "He never did wrong in his life, he never harmed no one. Had no debts, neither."

Coe had known Eversole slightly. He flipped and caught the punched casing again, then pocketed it. He wondered where Chris LaDue was, because he needed Chris now. He wanted the old man to nose around the Eversole place for further clues, if any. Coe himself wanted to see Dr. McCall, then have a chat with Tracy Silleck.

"Bristow, why don't you take Mrs. Eversole in for a while, so she can be with your wife? Either that, or you can send your wife to the Eversoles' for a few days."

"That'd be better, 'cause we got no spar' room."

"All right."

Coe rose and went out, leaving the two there. Behind him, the sun flung the shadow of the second-storey jail across his path, so that he had to walk for about thirty feet along its dark length before he was in white glare again. Later, armed with hindsight, he remembered it as an omen; but now, striding toward the doctor's office on Antelope Street, it was merely a cool shadow.

Passing the post office, he saw Tracy Silleck and turned off, deciding to have that chat now. Silleck was opening the door of the library when Coe reached him and said, "Just a minute."

Silleck was freshly shaven and wearing a clean shirt. "Morning, Marshall. You look worried."

Neely got right to the point. "Where were you all last night?"

"Me? Why, I was at the Sucker Lode, then I went to bed."

"You didn't leave town?"

"At night? What for?"

"Mind if I look at your horse?"

"Go right ahead." Silleck extended an arm in invitation. "I'll even look with you."

They crossed to Ockendon's Stables and examined Silleck's horse. There was nothing to show that it had been ridden recently—no quivering muscle, no clogged frogs, no chafe marks on belly or back.

Coe called Ockendon over. "Who was your night man?"

"Chris LaDue."

"Where is he?"

"You tell me. When I got here this morning, he was gone."

"Was this horse here?"

Ockendon looked at the animal, at Silleck, at Neely. Then he nodded. "Yes, why?"

"Yes, why?" Silleck repeated. "What's up, Marshall?"

"Jim Eversole was murdered early this morning. Silleck, I don't want you to leave town. Ockendon, when Chris shows up, send him to my office and tell him to wait there for me."

Tracy Silleck rolled and lit a cigarette. He nodded at Coe's disappearing figure. "Most suspicious man I ever saw."

"He gets his work done, though." Ockendon rubbed his jaws thoughtfully. "Wonder who could've killed Jim Eversole?"

"Let Neely find out."

Silleck walked over to the library and went in. Mildred smiled a greeting, pleased that he had come. She had never known a man quite like him before, and her interest in him was further heightened by Coe Neely's repeated

warnings that he was no good. There was good in everybody, to Mildred's way of thinking, and she intended to find some in this man. It was a challenge to her curiosity, a gauntlet flung at the feet of her maternal instincts.

Silleck put out his cigarette. "Ready for our date?"

"What time?"

"Oh—say, eight o'clock. I'll get the rig polished to perfection."

She heard herself say, "All right." She felt funny inside, quite mixed up and undecisive. This man was nothing like Coe, whose idea of a good time was to sit on the veranda and hold hands. Quick in her was the thought that Tracy might be a state or federal investigator who was tracking down the senator's killer. Excitement brightened her eyes.

Silleck mistook it for emotion of a more personal sort. When he put on his hat to leave, his hands were trembling; when he returned to his room at the hotel, he felt hot and dry inside, and light as a zephyr. He'd have to remember to pack a blanket in the rig tonight.

When after lunch he revisited the library, he found Mrs. Berry behind the desk, not Mildred. Mrs. Berry was plump, moist, and had a wart on her nose. Mildred, she explained, was busy fixing a dress for her date tonight, so she, Mrs. Berry, was taking her place for a few hours. Mrs. Berry smiled coyly. She desired to know if Mr. Tracy had been here earlier this afternoon; she had dozed, as she always did after lunch, and when she awoke there was the odor of cigar smoke in here.

"Not I, ma'am."

Silleck felt lighter than ever. He had trouble holding the volume of Audubon's *American Birds*, and more trouble

than ever in turning the pages. He almost dropped the envelope when he came across it. This one contained five one-hundred-dollar bills, and a suggestion to the effect that a like amount would be found in *Robinson Crusoe* if Benjamin Bristow also became a castaway.

Silleck appreciated the somber humor of that line. It caused him to smile.

He was smiling again that evening when he got the rig at Ockendon's, complete with neatly folded blanket behind the wide seat. The team handled nicely—he had paid enough for it, after all. When he stopped in front of Berry's Rooms and looped the reins around the whip socket, Mildred was already waiting for him in something white and gingham that had blue rosettes scattered across the swollen bodice.

He assisted her in, climbed up beside her, waved the whip, and guided the team out into the dusk.

There were no lamps on that rig, nor did Tracy want them. He was following the moon-path away from the end of Antelope Street; it lighted his way for half an hour, when he turned off and flanked a stand of cottonwoods that were in the bend of a slowly chuckling creek. The sound of the current depressed him. He braked, took off his hat, and lit a cigarette. The lights of Fifty-four were tiny orange dots far behind them.

He sat gazing sideways at Mildred's calm face, contemplating the female warmth of it. He bolstered his decision to possess her with the thought that she was a weak thing to be had for the taking, who needed, indeed, to be taken by a good man; and that it was her natural destiny as a woman to be twisted and torn.

Her eyes were turned up to him,

dark pools that had not yet become turbulent with mistrust. "You're a strange man." *And a simple one too, with all the complexities so far down inside you that you yourself don't know what makes you tick. . . .*

"A stranger among men, would be better."

"Yes." Once again she let herself think that he was an investigator. "That would be better."

His cigarette burned his fingers and he tossed it away. He edged forward on the seat and laid his head back on the blanket. "It's not an easy life." He wanted to stir her pity.

"The way you act, it's almost as if no one had ever been kind to you."

"Not many people have." This was all right, this was going his way. "I've never known a home, or a wife, or solid friends." That was true, at least.

"Who are you, anyway?"

He rolled his head towards her. "You might say I'm a range detective." He could smell her hair; a strand of it was tickling his cheek. He sat stiffly, hearing only his breathing and hers. A moon-struck glimpse of her trimly arched feet and her slender ankles on the dashboard made him swallow hard.

"Who do you work for?"

"Well—for myself."

She let him take one of her hands. So she'd been right all the time, he was a detective—a private operator. "How did you ever get into that business?"

His hand around hers was hard and ungiving, and for the first time her feeling of trust was wearing thin. There was no warmth to his flesh, no implied caress. Gently, she tried to withdraw her hand, but he hung onto it.

"Kidhood, call it. I was sort of forced

into this business." The persistent chuckling of the creek irritated him; somehow, it brought before him the image of a dead puppy in a long-ago grove, with blood and tears dripping onto a spade handle. . . .

He threw back his head and began to sing, startling her.

"Rye whisky, rye whisky,

For whisky I cry;

If I don't get rye whisky

I surely will die. . . .

*If the ocean was whisky and I was a duck,
I'd dive to the bottom and never come
up. . . ."*

The rhythmic lilt pleased her. "Where did you learn that—in the cradle?"

He rubbed his eyes savagely, hurting himself. "First time I ever heard that was—was at a dance."

He didn't tell her all of it—just that he'd gone to a dance, his first such affair, and had left early. He had left early because he'd been kicked out by the caller. He'd been kicked out by the caller because he'd been recognized as the orphaned son of the man known as Chief St. Lecque, the half-breed Pawnee who had headed General Harney's scouts some years before. The Chief had married—or set up house with—one of the Tracy women from South Dakota, and this was their issue.

"*Outside, Injun! You can't dance in here!*" And he'd had to get out and stay out, because the law wanted him for the murder of a granger named Gustav Holtzclaw, and he couldn't stand on his rights and argue because of the fear of being identified.

He grasped Mildred's other hand. "All I ever knew was guns, nothing else." His voice grew stronger as he

talked; he was addressing the immense jury of those he had killed. "I never even knew my parents. I didn't know where I'd come from, and no one cared."

He hitched his hips closer to hers. "God, I wish I could do it all over again." He snaked an arm around her shoulders. "Mildred," he whispered. Against his body she was soft and pliant and palpitating.

She started to squirm, to push him away, but his arms constricted around her body and his mouth clamped harshly against hers. He could feel the gracious curve of her against his ribs.

She cried out in a small way, and he squeezed her more forcefully to him. The weight of his body pushed her back on the blanket. He clawed at her dress.

She was struggling hard now, panic-stricken, wild to escape. But the man was inexorable. He shoved her down flat, and then one of her knees cut high and cracked into his groin and convulsed him upward and backward in animal agony. She struck again and caught him with her toe.

He toppled off the seat, his bull-howl of pain ringing through the darkness. He landed on his shoulders in the grass, clutching his abdomen and gasping. The team almost trotted over him; one wheel just missed his legs. Then he was alone in the night.

After a while he was able to rise; pretty soon he could walk. It took him almost an hour to walk back to town, and by that time the news was all over the place: Chris LaDue's well-chewed bones had been found in the lava beds of the Gilford Fault. One of Evan Marsh's boys had been out gunning for antelope jacks, and had stumbled across the spot. He'd had to fire six rounds

from his shotgun before the buzzards scattered. No sign of any wound—just the picked skeleton and some ragged clothing. And a broken-toed boot.

"What the hell was he doing out there?" Coe Neely shrieked the question to the awed faces. "Why did he? He never left town without telling me where he was going!"

Nobody answered him. There wasn't any answer.

Tracy Silleck lingered beyond the crowd in front of the marshal's office. Above him, the gloomy rampart of the second-story jail rose like a headstone. He lowered his eyes from it and saw Mildred Lane standing over there. She knew too much about him now and he hated her for that knowledge. His soul screamed at her from the wasteland in which it rode.

He swung around and walked away, fearful of the horror that still froze her face. Coe Neely would assume that it had been caused by the news of Chris LaDue, but Mildred Lane would know better for the rest of her life. Silleck carried with him the image of how her face might have looked had he succeeded, and that image infuriated him. Disgust lashed him like a braided whip—not disgust at her, but at himself for failing. That failure, if he brooded on it, would weaken him. He couldn't have that happen. . . .

He decided to pay an apologetic call on Jennie LaDue. He would beg her pardon for his manners of the night before, despite the fact that apologies were anathema to him, and ask her to have a drink. A dinner. A present—anything.

Jennie LaDue, however, was not available for anything that evening. She was in her balcony room, thrown across

the bed, crying her eyes out. Only when Neddie, the bartender, tapped on the door and told her that Tracy wanted her to have dinner with him, did she control herself.

She called, "Tell him—tell him to go to hell!"

The shout calmed her, somehow. Her tears dried with the slow return of logical thought, and presently she was sitting with her hands locked around her up-drawn knees, frowning at the brown-papered wall. Item: Tracy's brutish lovemaking had been interrupted the night before in the alley by her uncle. Item: Tracy had not been seen again until this morning. Item: her uncle had been found this evening.

She came off the bed and went to her dresser mirror. She turned this way and that, inspecting herself for facial faults that would have to be corrected with cosmetics.

Those noted, she lifted a gold-backed comb and drew it through the tangled strands of her hair, again and again and again. She decided to set a plain trap, with quakercloth and a single bracelet and maybe a couple of combs. She turned her head sideways, throwing a long thick mass of hair to the front of her shoulder, and plied the comb with rhythmic strokes. She pivoted on the cushioned stool and began with the other side of her head, submitting to the soothing crackle of electricity.

Pretty soon she was humming to herself, and her tears were entirely gone. The smile that came to her mouth was cold, like the grin of a famished tigress just before she leaps to the kill.

BENJAMIN BRISTOW handed his wife down at Eversole's gate and tapped her on the cheek. They weren't the kissing

kind, the Bristows, but they could convey in a finger-tap all the emotion they allowed themselves. Thirty years married, Emily and Ben Bristow, and still needing that finger-tap between them.

"I'll call back for you in two-three days," he told her. "Martha'll need your comfort that long."

"You be careful, Ben." Emily was a bonneted little woman with a firm mouth and an understanding eye. "Don't forget to force-feed the Pride of Paducah, she's about ready." The Pride of Paducah was a pig, and she was great with litter.

"Don't worry, Em." Benjamin opened his worn coat to show the metal butt of his .31-30. "No damyankee ever hit me in four years of war, an' I don't 'low as how any sneakin', skulkin' bushwhacker can do it now." He tapped her cheek again.

"You be careful, hear?"

"Stop worryin', Em. Make some o' those pan biscuits for me for when I get back."

He drove his flatbed wagon along the rutted trail, with eight bumpy miles to go. He figured to arrive home before noon, which would be time aplenty to feed the Pride and then get to doing the other chores. So he didn't use the whip; he let the team take its own pace through the ruts and around the pot holes.

This afternoon, he'd ride out to the bench and brand some more of that stock that poor Jim Eversole had sold him; and tonight he'd repair the springs on his wolf traps. He didn't think he could trap a wolf, he believed personally in strychnine; but there was no strychnine to be had in Fifty-four, so he had to depend on well-meated traps. He had lost four calves

already to wolves, and that was four too many.

Ben Bristow had been in this region for almost two years, having trekked up from Kentucky with the stirrings of ambition strumming his soul once more. He had done some farming near Paducah, and later had run a store. Then he had heard about the free ranges up north, and at the age of fifty had elected to try his hand at ranching.

Most men, even younger ones, would have hated the hot hours in the saddle, the gnawing monotony of repeated journeys over rugged terrain, the fierce blizzards of winter and the murderous heat of summer. The washouts, the erosions, the grass fires. But not Ben Bristow. His kind was built to last for a long time, and he was certain in his mind that he could shape this land the way he wanted it shaped, as the men who had come before him had shaped it.

He never roped strays or rustled stock from the big outfits, although neither did he ask questions when he bought stock from other men. Neither did he fence more range than he could use. What had caused the big ranchers to place him in their fatal category was his ability to develop a profitable claim in only two years. What would he accomplish in five years? Ten?

Now he rode east toward home, his wife safely behind him and his fences comfortably ahead. Before long, the ruddy sunlight showed distant blotches, ragged pools in the short grass which were his small herds grazing patiently. They were good to look at, they delineated the shape of the land in the image he was fashioning. The sight of them, the smell of them, made a man happy to be a member of the human race.

Three miles to go, now. Bold larks rose whistling at his approach, and skimmed away over the grass tops. There was a stand of juniper ahead and to the right, a scrubby patch of heat-wracked growth that was motionless in the windless morning. Ben Bristow found it interesting—so interesting that he decided to investigate it. It was like being in the army again: you never passed any natural cover without ascertaining first what it concealed.

He set the brake and slid down, pistol out. A quick dash forward to throw off a lurker's aim: a dive into the bush to surprise a lurker further: and nothing. A small lark, frightened into flight, rose steeply and sailed away.

Ben Bristow returned to his rig, feeling foolish. He replaced the pistol under his coat, kicked off the brake, and drove on. After all, this was his home, this was his land. He had a right to be on it.

His feeling of foolishness gave way to one of cockiness. He wondered how many sucklings would be at the Pride's teats come a week or two. He decided to repair the smokehouse this month.

TRACY SILLECK hadn't liked that dash into the juniper. It told him that he was tracking a man who had both brains and guts, and who could use the weapon he carried. Silleck had been up against that triple combination before, but not as yet in the vicinity of Fiftyfour. This Bristow was different.

Silleck was crouching in a slight depression behind the juniper thicket. His original intention had been to let Bristow pass, then crawl into the bushes and fire from there. He hadn't shot Bristow when the man plunged into the juniper because of the off-chance of a miss with his revolver. Daylight

killing was different from nighttime killing in that you had to have plenty of concealment; at night darkness covered you, but in daylight you had to find cover.

Silleck watched Bristow drive down a long, curving slope toward his home buildings, which were about two miles farther on. He let his quarry roll slowly from sight, then stood up and took from his hip pocket the only prop that he ever used: a homemade black hood with two hideous eyeholes cut into it. He tucked it under his neckerchief where it was handy, took his horse, and mounted.

When he reached the lip of the slope, Bristow's rig was lurching across the grazed-over flatlands. Silleck waited until the flatbed rig was entering the gate before he moved. He moved slowly, keeping a one-mile interval. When Bristow reached his yard and jumped off the seat, Silleck removed his hat, slipped the hood over his head, and pulled his hat down low over it.

His intention now was to trot right into Bristow's yard, facing down so that the quarry wouldn't see the hood at first and become alarmed. Then at the last moment Silleck would raise his face and the quarry, shocked, would stand as an immobile target.

The trick had worked before.

Ben Bristow turned his team out and went to the feedbin to get provender for the Pride of Paducah. She was lying in the sun against the wall of her pen, grunting and whuffling, her swollen teats quivering. Green flies droned lazily around her ears. Bristow, spreading feed before her, concluded that this litter would be a good one, all right. The Pride was immense with it.

He carried the empty feed bucket back to the bin, then went to the pump

for a drink of water before riding out to the bench to hair-brand the stock that Jim Eversole had recently sold him. He heard the steady *chuck-chuck* of oncoming hoofs and turned fast around. The rider who was trotting through the gate had his face down, hat brim forward, so that Bristow thought at first that the man was sick.

He hung the dipper on a nail. "Hallo!"

Tracy Silleck reined in fast, jerked his face up, and fanned a gun from its holster. Not a Winchester this time: rifles were no good for close-in work.

Ben Bristow's flash-thought was, *A stickup*; and he fell sprawling across the well platform—fell so fast that Silleck's bullet clanged off the pump handle and whinnied away in dying ricochet. Bristow fired twice, whipped himself over and leaped to his feet. He was running into the house when Silleck's second bullet whacked him on the shoulder and cracked the collarbone and literally knocked him into the kitchen.

Bristow was trapped and he knew it. His wound didn't bother him, but his tactical helplessness did. He was cut off, and his assailant—whoever it was—had vanished. Bristow lowered himself to one knee beside the window, and waited.

Tracy Silleck, on foot behind the barn, waited too. An uneasiness was crawling through him, ruffling his self-control. He had never before missed such a close shot, nor had any man ever had the chance to fire twice at him and live. For the second time since he'd been in Fiftyfour, he felt that circumstances were piling up against him, inexorably surrounding him.

He cat-footed around the corner of the barn and approached the house

with both guns out. His black hood was hot, and sweat tickled his cheeks and throat. Suddenly he broke into a run and threw himself against the house.

Ben Bristow, rising from his knee, tiptoed across the kitchen, gathered leg strength, and jumped into the sunshine, firing. But his assailant was not there; he had heard the kitchen planks creaking and had quietly gone. Now his voice struck out from the opposite end of the building and Bristow whipped around.

Silleck's words were small in the growing quiet. "You can't shoot straight with a busted shoulder." Then his guns kicked up a detonating crash that swelled like a wave against the buildings.

Ben Bristow cried faintly and fell over backward, feeling as if he had been kicked by a mustang's hind feet. He did contrive to raise his warm pistol and curve a numbing finger around the trigger; but all strength slipped from him like a tide running out, leaving only blackness. No target. Nothing. He thought he heard his wife's voice talking about pan biscuits before the silence of eternity stopped the words. . . .

The Pride of Paducah blinked at the creature who was staring at her through those roundcut holes.

A wash of disgust surged through Tracy Silleck at sight of the obese pig, and he fired twice into her head. The impact of the bullets caused her whole body to jounce, frightening away the flies for a while.

Silleck caught up his horse, peeled the hot hood from his head, and spurred south to make a wide circle around to the west and come into Fiftyfour from the northern approaches, from the direction of the Gilford Fault.

It was dusk when he raised the lights

of the town. It was dark when he put up his horse at Ockendon's. He told Neddie, the giggling bartender, that he'd been out to Evan Marsh's looking for work. He had, too. On the way back to town he had tarried at length with Marsh, chewing the fat and talking cattle. But Evan Marsh had had no work for him.

Neddie winked and craned his turkey neck over the bar. "Jennie—she says she's feeling better now, an' that maybe she'll have dinner with you!"

It was yet early and there were few customers in the Sucker Lode. A couple of bearded men playing cribbage. An out-of-work puncher snoring in the corner. Tracy Silleck combed his hair with his fingers, snugged up his neckerchief knot, and slowly, slowly, ascended the stairs to the balcony.

CHAPTER SIX

He Lets Down the Bars

JENNIE was plainly beautiful. She was simply dressed, not gaudily. There were no sequins now, no rouge. There was a quakercloth frock, two unbacked combs in her hair, and a slim golden bracelet around her wrist. A Christian maiden, captive of the Infidels.

"Sit down," she invited. "Give me your hat." She placed his sweaty hat on her dresser, then filled two heavy tumblers with whisky. "Been looking for work again?"

"Yes, at Marsh's."

"Any luck?"

"No." He held his tumbler to his parched lips, and drank. "This is an unexpected pleasure."

"It's mutual." She sat across from him, on the bed, and passed the tip of her tongue along her lips. Her eyes

were full of him. "What makes you so sad? You broke?"

"Me?" He finished his drink; made a cigarette; accepted another drink. Lit the cigarette. "I guess I was born that way."

He stared at her through a sweep of blue smoke. She was nothing like Mildred, she was more his kind. Mildred was prim and self-contained and quite unwilling to have herself loved by anyone, yet. But this Jennie girl—she was more Tracy's kind.

He had opened his life to a woman once, and he had no volition to open it ever again. The door was closed too tightly. There was no ability left in him to force it open, and even if there had been, there would be nothing inside but an empty room. . . .

Silleck said, "I knew a girl like you once." *But cleaner, baby, with cleaner hands and a cleaner heart.*

She nodded wearily. (*Here it comes, the tear-jerker, the buildup to cry.*) "And I knew a man like you. There—we're even."

"I wasn't kidding." He refilled his tumbler and sat down. He began to speak words that he had never uttered before, though they had dominated his impulses for years.

"We were colts, but it stuck. With me anyway, it stuck. It's been like a nail in me ever since." This girl, this Jennie, comforted his conscience, much as had that other girl, so long ago, vanished in the years behind him. Jennie wanted to accept him, at least, which was different from most. She seemed to be reaching toward him from the outer world of her own kind, beckoning him to enter.

Her smile was gentle. "Do you know, I'm beginning to believe you."

"I don't give a damn—" he slugged

his drink down—"if you do or not." He shook his jaws from side to side to clear his head. But it remained muddled, and the feeling was not unpleasant.

"She wasn't a friend, though—can you see that? She turned cold on me. . . . I had a friend once, though." Tracy let Jennie refill his tumbler. "D'I ever tell you how he was killed—huh? I was nine-ten years ol', working for a g-granger, and this granger killed my friend. He was a dog."

"The granger?"

"My friend. Wonderful, best in th' world." Silleck curled a fist and thumped his chest. "I buried him here. Whenever I call, he comes. He comes with his tail waggin' an' his tongue a yard long—understan' that? You bury a dog in your heart. . . . You think I'm loco, but I'm not loco. Not d-drunk either. Reason I loved that friend, he was the only one ever loved me." He fixed his luminous eyes on her.

She was uncomfortable; her plan was misfiring; he wasn't taking the bait from the trigger of the trap. She had wanted to loosen his tongue and snare him into talking about her Uncle Chris's last hours of life, and here he sat babbling about a dog.

The dog's name, he told her, was Tecumseh. A shaggy black mongrel with a white blaze on its chest. A wild thing spawned in the hills and chased from them by something wilder—a panther, perhaps, or a bear. Chased all the way to the granger's layout, with ragged claw marks still in its fur. Little Trace Silleck, the granger's workaway, had fed the frightened pup, fondled it, adopted it. Trace had never known affection before, and neither had the dog.

The granger's name was Holtzclaw,

a bullet-headed man who was bow-shouldered almost to deformity and whose temper banged open and shut like the weather over the Rockies. Gustav Holtzclaw used to larrup young Trace with a tug-strap when he was so inclined, and the boy's first blow struck in anger had been at that furious man's rage-distorted features.

When Trace struck, Tecumseh flew in and snapped for Holtzclaw's throat. There was a red moment of animal fury, of socking fists and splintering bone. Then the blast of the shotgun and the last rapid squeaking of a blown-through dog . . . and an awful silence that never quite ended for Trace Silleck.

When he picked up the shattered body of Tecumseh, Holtzclaw grinned gummily and ejected the smoking shell.

"May-pee now you vill spend more dime at the vork."

Cold with shock, wrists numb, Trace carried that warm, bloody body out of the house and across the rocky yard and down to a woodsy place he knew by the creek.

He dug a grave, his salt tears splashing on the spade handle. No more musky fur snuggling against him at night, now. No more hunts, no more swimming together. No more dropping table leftovers into that happy, long-tongued mouth (Holtzclaw wouldn't permit the dog to be fed at all, and Trace had to filch food for the purpose). No more running after gophers and woodcock, no more blending of dog smell with boy smell by the banks of this very creek with its serene waters murmuring comfortably by. . . . And the shovel bit into the hard ground, and the dog's body stiffened, and the boy's tears came faster. . . .

"Tecumseh," Tracy Silleck said to his empty tumbler. As he spoke the name, it almost seemed that a dog was barking happily and insistently from the far, far distances, imploring Trace to come out and play. "I think he heard me, Jennie." His eyes were heavy.

She refilled his tumbler. "What did you do then?" She was embarrassed for him because of the shamed mutter of his words. This proud, tensile man was becoming an incoherent hulk.

"I went back to the house, then . . ."

He went back to the house with the image of the newly-cairned grave in his eyes, took the shotgun off the wall, and loaded it with shells he found in the kitchen drawer. He walked barefooted through Tecumseh's sticky blood and found Holtzclaw in the back yard repairing a hame. Trace waited until the man looked up, until those malevolent eyes were blazing at him, before he fired.

"Both barrels," he told Jennie, and held up two fingers. "Then I skee-daddled. They were lookin' for me, but they never found me, an' they never will. No'm, they never will." He threw back his head and drank.

"That was a long time ago, wasn't it?"

"Thousand years ago."

"He was your first, wasn't he?" She set her drink aside untouched. "Tell me about the second."

"Second?" He shrugged loosely. "Got paid for the second. I'd been drinkin' rye whisky, see? An' a man said 'There's a Mex down the street, been botherin' my wife, an' I got a hundred dollars says—'"

He flung his tumbler aside and rose unsteadily, fingers opening and closing at his sides. Jennie was suddenly terrified; she had never seen such a sudden

concentration of hatred in any human eyes.

"You tryin' trap me?" His voice fluted soprano with suppressed rage.

"Trap you?" She drew her knees up and cringed against the wall.

Suddenly it didn't seem important to him any more. He snagged his hat off the dresser and clapped it on. "Thanks for dinner." He laughed and opened the door. Stepping onto the balcony, he hurled a final challenge into the rising sense of danger that was overshadowing him: "You two-bit whore—put on your warpaint an' dance!"

When the door had shut after him, she grinned. It was a wild grin, wide and white and satanic. She knew now who had killed her Uncle Chris.

All she had to do was prove it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

He Starts to Slip

LITTLE MARY WURTZ, whose father ran the dry-goods store on Antelope Street, presented herself, a five-cent piece, and an apple to Mildred Lane next morning in the library during school recess.

"The five cents is for that overdue book," Mary piped. She held it out. "Daddy doesn't get a chance to read much. He said I'd better do it for him."

Mildred recorded the nickel in the *Fines Due* register and thanked Mary for the apple. "And what does your daddy want you to read?"

"He said—he said—" Mary paused on the fringes of forgetfulness—"oh yes. He said *Robinson Crusoe*."

"That's a fascinating book. It's about a man who was cast away—you know, shipwrecked—on a lonely island." Mildred rose and went to the wall rack and took the volume out. "I'm sure you'll enjoy it."

She opened the front cover and stamped the date inside, then took out the card and riffled the pages as a matter of habit. Sometimes, people left markers in a book and forgot about them. An envelope flopped out and landed in her lap. She was about to put it in the top drawer and identify it later when she saw the block-penciled word *Tracy* on the front.

Mary Wurtz was waiting impatiently; recess was almost over. Mildred gave her the book and nodded her out. When she had gone, Mildred held the envelope in her hands for a long time, pondering what to do. There was no family in town called Tracy, and the only individual who answered to that name was the brooding drifter who had come in on the Fourth of July. She could still feel the imprint of his vicious fingers on her thighs.

A range detective, indeed!

She inserted a thumbnail under the envelope's flap and ripped it open. Inside was some currency, and a note. She counted five one-hundred-dollar bills.

Her heart was thudding against her ribs and she was, she knew, blushing with guilt; but she read the note anyway: *John Hansford is worth one thousand in The Spy by F. Cooper.*

Dizziness took hold of her, fuzzing her vision and making her feel faint. She had to grip the edge of the desk and swallow several times before the book-lined walls returned in a whirling radius of leather backs and shiny racks and framed prints.

The apple became a focal point for her; it lay on her blotter glistening red-yellow, with a saucy green leaf angling from the stem. It was clean and sweet, and it was real.

Nothing else seemed real, though. The world in which she lived had turned into cardboard and the very figures who moved through it were tenuous and ghostlike. The only thing she was immediately sure of was that Tracy was receiving money for deeds performed, and that the next performance somehow included old John Hansford.

The door swung open and Tracey Silleck came in. He hadn't shaved, his eyes were hound-dog pink, and he smelled stale.

Here, she thought, comes a man who kills for cash. But who's paying him? He comes in every day, but so does Hansford and Lester Royce and Gerald Hawxhurst, all three of whom are staying in town longer than they've ever stayed before. . . .

"Good morning," she said huskily.

"Morning." He twitched off his hat. "Sorry about the other night. I must have lost my head."

"Is there anything else you want?" Her crisp indifference made no impression on him, because she had beaten him on ground of his own choosing and he would not return to give fight again.

"Just thought I'd look at a book or two. If I can't get work punching cows, maybe I can sign on as a school-teacher."

He trailed his dirty fingers along the racks, searching. He moved faster, examining each title with impetuous haste. He spent ten minutes doing this, going from rack to rack while Mildred watched him with the envelope held deep in her skirt pocket.

He turned on her. "Where's that book?"

"What book?"

His hands crashed onto her desk. "*Robert Crusoe*—no, *Robinson Crusoe*!"

His fevered eyes were accusing her of keeping a secret. "It used to be here!"

"Our clientele, while small, is very active."

He beat her blotter with a fist, knocking the apple to the floor. "Don't fancy-talk me! Where's that book? I want to read it."

She picked up the apple, rubbed it on her sleeve, and replaced it on the blotter. "That book was taken out this morning by a little girl."

He was livid. "What little girl? For Christ sakes—"

"Don't use that language in here!" She glared across the desk at him. "Her name is Wurtz, and she's gone to school with it. Inasmuch as oafs are not allowed in school, I doubt if you'll get your filthy hands on it." She blew out her underlip. "Why don't you read something else—*The Spy*, say?"

"Wurtz?" he blurted. "Wurtz?" He had seen the name on a store front somewhere. He started to say something else to her, thought better of it, and stormed out.

Mildred waited for two minutes by the watch pinned to her brooch, then went into the post office. "Mr. Niggles?"

The postmaster raised his eyeshade to her, clacked his false teeth in greeting, and jerked his eyebrows up and down. "Yes, Millie?" Mr. Niggles was fond of the librarian.

"Will you do me a favor? Will you ask Mr. Neely to come to the library right away?" She didn't want Tracy to see her running to the marshal's office. "I—I can't leave just now."

"Deedy I will!" And Mr. Niggles whipped off his eyeshade, put on his hat, and hastened out.

Mildred returned to her desk and sat down and shut her eyes tightly. Her knees were tallow and her heart was

acting like a military march and her tongue was the size of a boot.

Mr. Niggles did not find Coe Neely in the marshal's office. Coe had left before breakfast for Benjamin Bristow's place to ask more closely about James Eversole's stock dealings in hope of finding a clue to some resentment against Eversole by one of the big ranchers. And so the marshal's office was closed and Mr. Niggles reluctantly reported that at the library.

Mildred had only one other male confidant in Fiftyfour, and that was Gerald Hawxhurst. He had been pestering her lately for a date, and she had been of a mind to give him one in order to make Coe jealous. Coe hadn't liked it when she'd driven out with Tracy, but he hadn't come to the flaring point. She had returned too soon for him to really get mad. So perhaps a date with Gerald, with his fine clothes and elegant mustaches, would have the required effect on Coe.

She would deliver this envelope to Gerald, and in return for his advice and assistance in the matter, he would be allowed to take her out. Just once, of course.

At noon she locked the library and went directly to the Indian Queen Hotel. The elderly clerk obliged her by carrying her message up to the second-floor room where the three ranchers habitually met. Approaching it across the carpeted corridor he heard Royce protesting against something:

"I say let's quit! Enough is enough!"

John Hansford's deep rumble came soothingly and calmly, which was when the clerk knocked. There was sudden silence. The clerk cleared his throat.

"Mr. Hawxhurst? A lady to see you in the lobby."

Gerald Hawxhurst came out, carefully

pulled the door shut behind him, and followed the clerk downstairs. He bent gallantly over Mildred's hand. "You seem upset, my dear."

"I am, Gerry." She drew the envelope from her reticule. "This morning, not an hour ago, I found—"

The latticed doors whanged open and a wild-eyed Tracey Silleck stamped in, followed by a pasty-faced little man who was hopping mad.

"You leave my daughter alone, I say! You ain't got the right to bust into her schoolroom an' snatch a book right out of—"

Tracy thrust backward with a mighty arm and knocked Mary Wurtz's father across the lobby. The little man staggered crazily, windmilling his gartered arms to stop himself. But the momentum of the blow was too great and he landed against a chair and upset a table and went down over it, backward. A splintering crash echoed through the lobby.

The elderly clerk behind the desk snapped his suspenders in alarm and got down on the floor. Came shooting, he intended to live through it.

Mr. Wurtz climbed from his wreckage and looked around the lobby angrily, but that was all he did.

Mildred slipped the envelope back into her reticule. It was Coe's affair, logically, and not Gerald's.

Gerald touched the tips of his mustaches and beamed. "Our friend of the band concert seems to be riled. Has someone been accusing him of petty theft again?"

Tracy Silleck was glowering at Mildred. He stank of sweat and old whisky and rancid leather. The fuzzy mandibles of his lower jaw were greasy. "Who's been hangin' around that library? He smokes cigars—"

"Just a minute." Hawxhurst threw back his lapel to display the ivoryed butt of a derringer. "Take off your hat when you're addressing a lady." His voice was low, but it came cartridge-clear.

The lady, however, had abruptly abandoned the gentlemen. She left the hotel hurriedly, wanting to get to the library, back to her room—any place where she could be alone. She felt that she had stepped into something that was too big for her, that would engulf her.

Silleck again had the sensation of being surrounded. In a physical sense it was not yet dangerous—a fop in front of him and a flabby storekeeper behind him. But mentally, it was bad. He'd been slipping, he'd been blundering into things. He was losing his touch. His time in Fiftyfour was about run out. He had been suspected of these killings, but there had been no proof. Now he was creating his own proof, pointing to the evidence by his very behavior, by his rudderless plunges from one person to another, from one place to the other. . . .

He backed off and walked through the latticed doors to the street. It was fairly past noon, and people were moving about. Some glanced at him, and as quickly glanced away.

He crossed to the Sucker Lode and wandered close to a four-handed poker game at a back table. The dealer indicated a chair, but he shook his head. The game went on.

Half his mind was on that game, and the other half was on himself. He resented these people who accepted him on the surface but who had no real use for him at all. The tales of his rough coming—of his scrap with Chris LaDue at

the band concert, of his kicking Eversole; of his throwing Coe Neely out of his room and of his returning afoot from a ride with Mildred Lane—all had been told through town with relish. His reputation as a personality had grown, but his stature as a man had not. All his life, he had been jostled by the crowds he walked with.

From boyhood he had been a killer, detesting the world of weakness. Now he was horrified to think that his own progressive fumbblings—his clumsiness at Bristow's and his stupid impetuosity about the library book—might ultimately lead to a show of cowardice. And he was losing his way with the ladies, too. Always before had a combination of persuasion and force, timed right, led to satisfactory results. But of the two girls he had been alone with in Fiftyfour, one had rendered him temporarily helpless and the other had repelled him with her sly curiosity. Not a very good score.

He accepted a second invitation to join the poker game. Three of the players were local—an implements dealer, a restaurant supplier, and an ironmonger. The fourth was a stranger whose name, he submitted, was Yates. He'd just arrived that noon on the Omaha stage.

"Drummer?" Silleck asked idly.

"Advance man for the railroad, buying right-of-way." Yates added to the discard. "Two here."

The pot was built up to a showdown. "I'll take three. . . . Is the U.S. Marshal any better?"

Yates sniffed. "He's had the summer complaint, but he's out of bed now. Can't get around much, though."

"Wigfall, isn't it?"

"Raise you four. . . . Yes, Al Wigfall. . . . Call?"

"Raise again."

The game went on. When Jennie LaDue appeared at the top of the stairs, Yates made a hopeful remark but was told, in a whisper, "Nothing there."

Tracy Silleck sat rigidly, staring at his cards. Jennie was coming down-stairs now, posturing from step to step. Silleck pretended not to notice her. He hit a ten and lost with a queen, and cursed. Jennie, sinuous in a blue wrapper sashed high and tight under her bosom, went into the kitchen.

"Nothing there, you say?"

"I'll take three. . . . Nope. Lost her uncle a few days ago—the wolves musta got him . . . And five for the pot. . . . That kinda changed her. . . . Raise you two."

Jennie emerged from the kitchen with a plate of food and carried it up to her room.

The afternoon went over to twilight, and Tracy Silleck lost one hundred and ten dollars. He wasn't so good at cards any more, either. He didn't care about the money, he could afford it; what was disturbing his play was where in hell that envelope was. He had stupidly hammered his way into the schoolroom and seized the copy of *Robinson Crusoe* from Mary Wurtz and almost torn it apart, which had sent Mary running for her father.

Then he had tried to break into the library to search the racks again, but it had been closed for the lunch hour and Mr. Niggles had directed him to the Indian Queen, where he'd found Mildred and Hawxhurst talking in the lobby.

"Deal me out, boys." He stood up. "I'll send a drink over." He rubbed the inside of his leg, where he kept a final ace-in-the-hole which he had never had to use thus far.

"Mighty nice of you. Most losers wouldn't buy."

"I'm not accustomed to losing." Silleck was tired; he was dirty. "Neddie, send 'em what they want and charge it to me. I'll be back later for supper."

The bartender finished lighting the lamps. A swamper appeared and worked his mop in large circles across the floor, preparing for the evening's trade. "Raise yo' feet please, gents."

Tracy Silleck stepped out into Western Boulevard. Across the street, an orange stain of lamplight was blooming in the marshal's office. Coe Neely's slim silhouette was sharply limned; his winded horse was at the tie-rail, nervously switching its tail. Neely bent over the lamp, and the office went dark. He came out with a rifle on his arm, cocked it, and started toward the Sucker Lode.

Silleck wheeled back into the saloon and hopped lightly over the circling mop. He thought of going out through the kitchen, but decided not to. Neely might enter from that direction, to take him from behind.

He took the stairs three at a time and tried the first door he came to. It was locked. He tried another, and that was locked too. Then Jennie's door opened and she leaned out.

Silleck dodged past her into the room just at Coe Neely marched in through the front doors below.

Jennie shut her door and pressed her back against it, eyes wide with challenge. "What do you want?"

"Time, sister, time. Where does that window lead to?" He went to it and peered out. A hip-roofed kitchen shed was below, and beyond it was the alley separating the Sucker Lode from Ockendon's Stables.

Below in the barroom: silence.

Coe Neely stood at the foot of the stairs, forming a question with his lips. The poker players stabbed their fingers toward the balcony. Coe nodded, hefted the rifle, and started up.

Silleck heard his bootfalls coming. "Look, Jennie girl—stall for time. Tell him I'm not in here." He hated himself for having to plead, and he hated the girl for knowing it.

"Did you give my uncle time?" She had him snared now, but she wanted to play with him a few moments before directing the kill. He was back-stepping, flinching at last from his manner of living, and she knew it.

There was only one thing that Tracy Silleck could do in that instant, and he did it. His knuckles flashed, struck. There was the clapping noise of teeth whacked against teeth, and Jennie went down with a welt on her underjaw. Silleck propped her against the door, and skipped to the window. He went over the sill and dropped onto the hip-roofed shed lightly as a cat. A minute later he was taking his horse from its stall in Ockendon's.

Coe Neely, receiving no reply from behind Jennie's door, smashed the hinges with the stock of his rifle and went in firing.

He tripped over Jennie's unconscious form and went almost to his knees before he recovered himself. He was too late, the girl's bruised jaw and the open window and the diminishing sound of flying hoofs told him that.

Tracy Silleck rode away from Fifty-four with his hat pulled low and his teeth bared to the wind of his passing. He planned now to decoy the pursuit onto the Gilford Fault, where no hoof-marks would show in the lava, then jackknife back past the head-of-track and take a day's blow near Fiftyfour

while they were looking for him farther north. Eventually he would return to Omaha, where it was easier and more comfortable to hide than it was on the prairie.

That had been a near thing, back in the Sucker Lode. Somebody must have informed on him, somebody who had enough proof against him to warrant an arrest. He had never been so close to capture before in his life. It was like an omen to him, and he tried to shake it off. Every nerve in his body screamed for a drink.

He decided to return to Omaha damned soon, and silence those screams.

CHAPTER EIGHT

He Wanders in Darkness

ALBERT D. WIGFALL, U.S. Marshal in Omaha, was a whiskey old man with long, tobacco-tanned mustaches and long, tobacco-tanned teeth. Listening to Coe Neely, he carved a chew from his plug of Old Bull, inserted it between molars and cheek, and folded his knife. "Where'd you find the Winchester?" He returned the knife to his vest pocket.

"Behind some junipers on the way to Bristow's," Cole told him. "The bushes were broken apart, so I went in and had a look-see. It's a forty-four, center-fire, the same that killed Senator Tubman." He fished a short grass riata from his side pocket and began twirling it.

"And Jim Eversole?"

"It killed Jim Eversole too."

Al Wigfall chewed contentedly, softening up his cud for proper spitting. "What about Bristow?"

"Two forty-four rim-fires got him. Revolvers. Same type of bullet I found

in the bench in front of the bandstand. Silleck sent a shot into it last Fourth, to impress us with his marksmanship."

"There're a passel of forty-fours west of the Atlantic Ocean, Coe."

"I know, but these are all marked—three knife cuts across the noses. They came from the same gun." He flicked the riata onto the spittoon and tugged it closer to Wigfall.

But Wigfall, working up an immense ball of juice, kicked it out to mid-range again, then spat sideways. It slapped into the spittoon with the sound of dropped playing cards.

"Bad boy, Tracy Silleck. Very bad boy. This's the first time we've had enough evidence against him to haul him into court. Court, o' course, is one thing. Conviction's another."

"We'll get a conviction," Coe said grimly. He rolled a cornshuck and lit it. "I'm going to arrest him and you're going to release him to my jurisdiction, and he's going to be tried in Fiftyfour. He's going to be hanged there, too."

"Want some help?" Wigfall was smiling behind his hand.

"No, I'd rather handle this alone. He's here in Omaha someplace. He was recognized two days ago, crossing the Platte near the head-of-track at The Weeping Waters, heading this way. If I have a posse with me, he'll start shooting. I don't want that."

"How'll you take him?" Wigfall spat again—a gleaming brown ribbon that looped over twice and struck the spittoon and made it ring.

"I've got a few ideas on the matter."

"You've got to prepare a case before you can present it—you an' the county attorney. Who you goin' to say was paying him?"

Coe stuffed the riata into his pocket and stood up. "I don't know. That envelope

that Mildred found should be enough to hang anybody."

"Yes, but not everybody." And Al Wigfall spat again and chimed the spittoon. "It offered a thousand dollars for John Hansford. Now, old John might be the culprit. He might've included his name on the list to exclude himself from suspicion. Then there's Les Royce—a mean little bastard when he wants to be—and there's Gerry Hawxhurst. He's too much of a dandy, though. Lets his foreman do all the work on the Tip-toe." Wigfall yawned brownly. "In any case, whoever paid Silleck is scot-free—unless Silleck knows who it is."

"I don't think he does." Coe took a last drag on his cornshuck. "It seems a damned shame that the silent partner won't hang too. He's as much to blame as Silleck."

"What makes you so sure that Silleck'll hang? You haven't even arrested him yet."

"I guess I better get to doing it." Coe was near-graveled, he was worn out and saddle-stiff and weary. He'd criss-crossed the land for a week now, and he'd had enough of it.

"Want to spruce up before you start? There's a basin an' razor—"

"That's just what I don't want to do. I don't want any guns, either." He unstrapped his belt and gave it to Wigfall. "Silleck may be good at stalking, but I doubt if he's much good while being stalked."

He went out into the noisy, cart-filled street and headed for the nearest saloon. He knew how he looked: red-eyed and gaunt, with a foul beard and filthy clothing.

He ordered rye, but the bartender shook his head. "Let's see your money first."

That satisfied Coe completely. He was a bum to any eye, and at the best a drifter. He went out into the street, not knowing how to start but fairly certain how to finish.

It took him all day to arrive at the Brass Boot, a cellar bar where Custer Avenue angled into East Missouri Street. The day had been hard on his feet and hard on his patience. Some of the people he had spoken to remembered a man answering Tracy Silleck's description, but most did not. Silleck was not a safe man to put the finger on; his retaliations were known to be quick and final.

But one bartender did cautiously inquire, "You a friend of his?"

"I've got something for him."

"Oh? Well, he was in here yestiddy, lookin' awful. No, he was alone. Yeah, kinda drunk, an' not talkin' to anyone. Looked like he'd been to a funeral—heh-heh. Have a drink?"

At yet another place, the proprietor professed great dislike for Silleck, and said he was willing to go along with identification. This proprietor chewed a gold toothpick and kept his eyes half-closed.

"The son-of-a-bitch was in here this morning, drinking up a night's thirst. See that buffler head up there on the wall? Well, he did that to the left eye. He pulled a gun and let go at the eyes, and he missed one and chipped the other. His aim is failing him. I made him pay for it, too. He said to send the bill to Al Wigfall—know him?—and I told him he'd better pay now and we'd both forget it. He thought that over a minute, and then he paid. Peeled off a hundred-note and slung it at me and said to keep the change. Then he walked out. No, I don't know where he went."

Toward late afternoon, Coe was in a place on West Missouri Street, four blocks from Custer Avenue, listening to a floorman describe the quarry's recent visit.

"About an hour ago, it was. He came in—this fella you're talkin' about—an' ordered sour mash. Said nothin' else would do, an' leave the bottle. I charged him twenty-five cents a shot an' he said twenty-five cents was too much. Then he laughed nasty-like an' handed me a wad of money an' said go die, can't you see I'm busy drinkin' with my friends? He was alone, o' course.

"Wellsir, Adolf Hubschmidt, which owns the brewery across the street there, you can see the grillwork on the entrance if you lean a little to your right, well, he came in for what he calls his schnapps—you know, his hootch—like he does daily an' pays regular an' always leaves a tip. At Christmas, too, he sends turkeys to the boys, an' if any of their kids or wives are sick, Mr. Hubschmidt takes care of the bill, you know?

"Well, Mr. Hubschmidt was jawin' with Ralph over there—he's head day barkeep—an' Mr. Hubschmidt, he's got a German accent, you know? Wellsir, Mr. Hubschmidt was talkin' about will the Mizzoura bust her banks ag'in this year, an' if she does I hope it'll wash out Council Bluffs, they got too many breweries there already—only Mr. Hubschmidt, he sounded like 'Dey god doo many prooweries dere already yet.'

"Then this fella you're talkin' about, he got up from that table over there where I'd left the bottle of sour mash with him, an' he come up here to the bar an' grabbed Mr. Hubschmidt by the neck an' shook him like you'd shake a

dog. He says, 'I don't like Germans. Get out.' Well now, Mr. Hubschmidt didn't want to start any trouble, an' neither did Ralph, we run a nice place here, or try to, you know? So Ralph said, 'Take it easy, mister big. Go back an' sit down or pay up an' get out, it makes no difference to me.'

"Mr Hubschmidt, he tried to shake this fella's hand off, an' said it was all right, he was just talkin' with Ralph here, have a drink on me. That made your fella madder than ever, an' he hauled back an' gave Mr. Hubschmidt a belt on the mouth that you coulda heard on Cluster. Mr. Hubschmidt got all bloody in the teeth an' Ralph hurdled the bar an' I joined in an' some of the other lads helped us, an' we rushed your fella right to hell outa here, clear to the street by the seat of his pants, an' him bellowin' all the time tryin' to get his guns out.

"We threw him across the sidewalk an' against a dray that was standin' there, an' he started for his guns but he never drew 'em. Nossir, he never drew 'em. He was sittin' there in a pile of horse manure that the dray team had just dropped, with his mouth hangin' open an' his hands on his guns. Then he picked himself up an' staggered down toward Custer, not even brushin' the horse manure off. About an hour ago, it was."

TRACY SILLECK, swaying over the sticky bar of the Brass Boot, swallowed the brown corruption that kept rising from his stomach, the nauseous result of a three-day jamboree that didn't seem to be tapering off. He had tried to enter better bars than this one, but none of them would have him; and so here he was in a musty cellar at the junction of East Missouri and Custer, trying not to vomit.

On the way here from the place where they'd thrown him out, he had accidentally jostled a well-dressed young woman, and her perfume was clinging to his grimy nostrils with maddening persistence. He had tried to apologize to the young woman but she had merely walked faster, ignoring him; and although now she was gone her perfume remained, and it made him want to cry.

He suddenly gave up the nausea with a convulsive movement of his stubbled jaw and watched it form in a puddle at his feet. His stomach, unaccustomed to so much alcohol, had finally rebelled.

He reached for his neckerchief, but it was gone. His shirt was caked with filth and his trousers were smeared with it. One spur had come loose and the boot seam was open, so that sawdust leaked in. He kept stamping that foot, like a tethered horse shoeing bothersome flies, and the bartender kept looking at him expectantly, as if he was demanding service.

He was wiping off his mouth with his sleeve when a familiar-looking person stepped up next to him and asked for beer. This person was tall, with a wide mouth and a tilted nose and too many freckles.

Coe Neely lifted his beer and tasted it. The bartender, suspicious of his ragged appearance, asked for immediate payment. Coe produced it, then turned to Silleck.

"Guess we're both out of work. Have a drink on me."

Tracy Silleck grew crafty. This was the marshal of Fiftyfour, this was the youngster who'd chased him through Jennie's room with a rifle. Silleck clawed clumsily at his holsters with rubbery fingers.

"No," Coe Neely told him quietly. "I haven't any guns. Come on, have a drink." He offered the makings. "Smoke?"

"No guns?" Silleck seized the edge of the bar and with a mighty effort pulled himself erect. "Lose your badge too, huh?" He blinked and shook his head, as if he was recovering from a blow.

"Sort of. I'm a foot bum. Got no horse, either."

Silleck assimilated that information. "No horse? Chrissake, 're all men quittin' horses? What's happenin' to th' world? Railroads, tha's what. People huntin' antelope from th' steam cars. Wha' kind world you call that?"

Neely signaled for more service, and paid. He went over carefully in his mind what Jennie LaDue had told him after she recovered consciousness in her room above the Sucker Lode. He said. "Think I'll get a grubstake, and a little dog for companionship."

"D'you say dog?" Silleck's fuddled thinking was settling around the hazy image of little Tecumseh's shot-ruptured fur.

"Sure, Trace. A dog."

Silleck swayed dangerously to one side, and caught himself. "An' don' call me Trace, either."

"Okay, I won't call you Trace."

Neely was pleased with his allusions to the only happy period in life that Silleck had ever known. He had no further fear of this disintegrating flotsam; the man's co-ordination was no stronger than his spirit and his spirit had become raddled by drink and, at long last, by his conscience and the haunting specter of the lives he had blown out.

Silleck dragged an arm across his sleepy eyes, and sighed. Maybe this Neely would help him, would accept a grubstake from him, and together they

could strike out for the hills and get lost for a while.

It would be nice to have Neely along because he knew the habits of peace officers in the region, and also the habits of the men who would make up the posses.

"Gimme 'nother drink." He opened an eye on Neely. "So they fired yuh out, huh? Well, t' hell withum. They fired me out once, too. . . ."

He heard the music again, saw the caller. Heard the rollicking beat of *Rye Whisky* and felt the caller's hard fingers on his sleeve: "*Outside, Injun, you can't dance in here!*" And he could smell her perfume and hear her say, "*You're hurting me, Trace. Please don't do that.*"

"*You're my twoman, you're going to be my wife. All the past is east of here and I got me a job and—*"

Her slap was swift and sure. "*You're sick—sick in the head. You don't want to get well. . . .*" Her voice roamed away.

Then Jennie LaDue was sitting on the back bar, dressed in thin quaker-cloth and saying, "*Tell me about the second.*"

"You tryin' t' trap me?" he shrieked, and picked up the bottle of sour mash and fired it past Coe Neely to where Jennie was sitting among the bottles. It exploded in a great sunburst of amber wetness and shattered half a dozen other bottles.

The bartender advanced on Silleck threateningly, a bung-starter in one hand. "What the hell ails you, mister?" He shook the bung-starter. "You can talk to yourself all you like an' you can puke in the sawdust too, but by Jesus that booze costs me money!" The bung-starter descended heavily but Coe Neely caught it and twisted it away.

"It's all right, I'll pay the damages. Him and me are going to be pardners for a while."

"Well, tell him to behave." The bartender was mollified at the sight of greenbacks. "Make him pull in his claws."

"Claws?" Silleck snickered inanely. "I had claws once—four'm. . . Ah-h—hell." He lowered his head to the drink that Neely poured, going down to meet his upcoming hand.

"Come on, let's sit down." Coe guided him to a table and pushed a chair under him just in time.

Silleck belched loudly, and rubbed his stomach. "Wigfall's got no ev-dence against me—neither've you—neither Holtzclaw." He shook his head back and forth. "Only man ev' saw me kill someone was ol' Ringler. But I'll get 'im someday, an' shut 'im up for good."

"Evidence? You don't need evidence to get another drink. Here, let me pour it for you."

Coe Neely was slightly disgusted with himself at having to do it this way, but he reminded himself that this was the best way, that indeed any way was best so long as the killer could be taken. He abjectly agreed with his own hypothesis that he could not stand gun-to-gun with Silleck and shoot it out, and that if a posse tried it in a barroom, it would only result in more killings. There had been enough killings already, so it had to be this way.

"If we're going to ride together, Tracy, we'd better pool up. How much money have you got?"

"Money?" Silleck brushed the word aside with a derisive snort. "All y' want." He fumbled for his wallet and tossed it on the table.

"I mean—how much did you get for

those nesters? John Hansford was worth a thousand, so the others must have come at about five hundred apiece. That right?"

"J—John Hansford?" Silleck sat straighter and placed his big hands on the table. "D'you say Hansford—you!" He leveled a trembling finger at Neely. "You're fella's been putting money in envelopes inna library—you?"

"Sure," Coe purred, "I'm the fella. Didn't you guess it? That's why I turned in my badge. It got too hot for me. That little girl—Mary Wurtz—she broke up the play."

Silleck was staring at Neely as if hypnotized. He laughed thickly.

"You' f'r Crissakes." Then his eyes opened dangerously wide and his hands snaked down to his holsters. "How come you don' know how much I got f'r the nesters, if you were payin' off—huh?" With a supreme effort he gathered his ebbing strength and stood up. "You nev' turned in y'r badge!"

A final combative impulse flashed through him as he tried to draw. His eyes protruded and his lips worked and his chest swelled against his shirt.

Coe Neely slid sideways out of his chair, yanked the riata from his pocket, and whipped it outward and downward. It snagged Silleck's unloosened spur and before he could find the strength to fire, Neely gave a sharp jerk and Silleck's foot was torn upward behind his knee, buckling it. He fired as he went down, and the bullets churned into the ceiling. Plaster sifted onto his upturned face as he lay on the floor, knocked totally unconscious by the impact of his head on the heavy brass rim of a spittoon.

He lay there, a fallen, filthy giant, with spent gunsmoke clouding the fabric of his shirt. Coe took the guns, trussed

the hands that had fired them, and asked the bartender for assistance.

The bartender came around to the table cautiously. "I guess you two ain't goin' to be pardners after all."

"No, I guess not." Coe hooked his hands under Silleck's shoulders and lifted. "He's not the friendly kind."

CHAPTER NINE

He Goes Home

THE SUN of late July was warm on the newly mortared bricks of the court house in Fiftyfour. The trial of *The People vs. Tracy Silleck et al* was entering its last day, and Judge Pollifaxen was weary. He swung a straw fan to and fro, stirring up the heat in front of his face.

The lawyer for the defense was hammering at a salient point during his fevered summation: "But who among us—*who* was the man who conspired to contrive the murder of these people? He walks the streets today, he sits perhaps in this very room with more money in his foul pockets with which to buy more lives—"

Judge Pollifaxen yawned behind his fan. The endless examinations, the chain of witnesses, the stout denials, had worn his attention thin. So far as he was concerned, the verdict was in the bag.

The evidence had been neatly presented: the gun that had killed Benjamin Bristow was the gun that had been fired into the bench in front of the bandstand—Tracy Silleck's gun; the rifle that had killed James Eversole had also killed Senator Josh Tubman and, most likely, old Chris LaDue. And the revolver had hurled marked bullets—three knife cuts across the snubbed noses. Those bullets had been found,

variously, in the bench, in Bristow's body, in the body of his prize pig; and in the ceiling plaster of the Brass Boot in Omaha.

That girl—Judge Pollifaxen's slumbrous gaze wandered to where Mildred Lane was sitting—was smart. She'd really broken the case. She would probably marry Coe Neely now, and they would start housekeeping on the reward money. A nice couple, a decided improvement to the growing town of Fiftyfour.

The railroad was coming soon, the head-of-track was inching nearer each day, and the advance man—what was his name? Yates?—had already departed to continue his operations in other localities, having successfully concluded them here.

The lawyer for the defense was perspiring heavily. "And so, gentlemen of the jury, I beseech you to consider that Tracy Silleck stands not alone guilty, and that should you unwisely condemn him to death you will leave amongst us of the living a man whose pockets . . ."

The jury was out for eighteen minutes, but long before it returned with a verdict, everybody knew what that verdict would be. Workmen were already constructing a gallows behind the two-story jail.

THE SOUNDS OF POUNDING AND SAWING, the slatting of a testing rope, came to Coe Neely's ears as July went over into August and he sat more and more in his office trying to trace in his mind the features of Silleck's silent partner. On the day of the hanging—a Saturday, when market crowds would be in town for the event—Mildred Lane came in and carefully closed the door behind her. Beyond her in the passageway

leading to the gallows, three men were following the state executioner toward the rear.

The executioner was explaining, "You see, gentlemen, we'll drop a sand-bag through the trap three times to test the mechanism, before we drop the prisoner through. I like my work to be flawless—"

Coe said, "Who's he talking to?"

"John Hansford and Lester Royce and Gerald Hawxhurst. And that's what I came to see you about." She stepped closer. "I don't know why I hadn't thought of it before, Coe. I guess it was the shock of everything, and worrying about you trying to find Silleck, and all. But I remember now, and I can swear to it."

"If you've got additional evidence, it's not going to do much good now."

The execution could not be delayed because Judge Pollifaxen, the only person who could make a plea of intercession with the governor, was at the other end of his circuit and could never be reached in time. And the governor himself was up in the Elkhorn country somewhere, fishing.

"This won't affect Silleck, Coe, but it might tell us who was paying him." She spoke a name softly. "He was the only man in the library on July third, the day the three of them got back from Omaha. And he was the only one of the three who came in the morning Mary Wurtz took *Robinson Crusoe* and I found the envelope. I'm certain he's just as guilty as Silleck."

"So am I—but how can you prove it in court after Silleck's dead? He'd have to testify as to how he was first contacted, what he was told to do—oh, hell."

"Isn't there something—?"

Coe Neely held up a hand. "I think

there is. Silleck's been convicted of so many murders that one more won't make any difference—as poor Chris said about the senator. . . . Yes, there's something that can be done." His mouth closed like a trap and his eyes slitted almost shut.

Behind the jail, the executioner flung up an arm proudly. "There it is, gentlemen, all oiled and ready to go!"

Lester Royce consulted his key-winder and noted that the hanging would take place in less than an hour. His pulse was unaccountably fast and he had trouble making spit. He glanced nervously at old John Hansford.

Hansford pulled at the shaggy ends of his white mustaches and said for the twentieth time that week, "I never knew I was worth a thousand dollars dead. Somebody sure wants my range bad enough to pay it."

Gerald Hawxhurst produced a bright yellow handkerchief, swept it to his nose, and blew mightily. "I'm glad it's over, anyway. We've all had enough."

Hansford said for the second time in a month, "I've got a damned good notion to sell out." And this time he meant it.

Lester Royce said, "I've got a damned good notion to buy up Eversole's and Bristow's places and give 'em to the widows as a Christmas-is-coming present." He meant it, too. "Nor am I averse to staking Jennie LaDue to a share in the Sucker Lode."

"That was my idea, too," Hawxhurst murmured. He'd liked old Chris, in his peculiar way. He unbuttoned his coat, tugged at his vest, and drew forth a heavy watch. "Forty minutes to go."

Coe Neely, alone in his office with the resonant *click-cluck* of the wall clock in his ears, went to the gun rack and unlocked it. He removed one of Silleck's

impounded .44s from its hook, flipped out the cylinder, and inserted a single cartridge. He flipped the cylinder back into the frame, closed the rack and locked it.

He ascended the rickety stairs to the cells above, his knees shaking and his palms dry.

Tracy Silleck was the only prisoner. "Comes the conqueror, huh?" He dragged his eyes from the sight of the gallows in the yard behind the jail.

"Not to gloat."

"I don't want a preacher, if that's what you came to ask."

Coe had the .44 in his hand. "I came to tell you something for my own good, not yours: you're a son-of-a-bitch and you're guilty as hell, you're going to hang and by God you deserve to."

"Thanks, Neely. I love you too."

"Now I'll tell you something for your own good: you had a partner but you don't know who he is. I do. You can pass judgment on him just like the jury passed judgment on you." Coe held the revolver up. "You never gave mankind much of a break, Silleck, but mankind's going to offer you one now."

He spun the .44 until it was butt first toward Tracy Silleck, then thrust it between the bars and held it. "There's one slug in the cylinder. In three minutes I'll be down by the gallows talking to your partner. I'll keep out of the line of fire."

Silleck couldn't seem to comprehend it. He turned the .44 over and over in his hands, staring at it as if he'd never seen it before. He flipped out the cylinder, saw the lone cartridge, and flipped the cylinder shut again.

"Just a minute, Neely." Silleck's grin was quick; this kid marshal was growing up into his job, he was going to be all right. "You're taking a chance. I could

shoot you with this—or I could shoot myself and cheat the rope."

The thin whoop of an engine whistle at the head-of-track came as a single pulsebeat and was gone. The violent years were already becoming a dull memory.

"I've considered those possibilities, Silleck. I'm banking on the chance that you'd rather shoot the man who refused to share your guilt with you."

"Yeah? Well, here." And Tracy Silleck flicked the .44 out through the bars. It landed at Neely's feet. "I've got my own ace-in-the-hole, thanks. I was going to beat the rope with it, but I guess I won't now, if you'll show me a better target than myself."

He dipped a hand down into the front of his trousers, crouched, fumbled, and snagged out a .34-caliber Paterson about the size of his palm. "You missed this when you searched me in Omaha. Show me my partner."

"Where the hell did you—"

"Tied to the inside of my thigh. Get going, Neely. So long."

Coe Neely picked up the .44 and put it in his pocket. "Well, I'll be damned. . . . So long, Silleck."

He clumped down the rickety stairs and joined Hansford, Royce, and Hawxhurst by the gallows. The executioner was ready, watch in hand. Dr. McCall was sitting on the coffin, impatient to get this business over with; Mrs. Wurtz was expecting her third child this afternoon, and the arrival of a life was more important than the departure of one.

Coe took this man by the elbow and led him aside. "There's something I think you should know." He sidestepped from the line of fire, and cleared his throat.

The flat bark of the single-shot Paterson

came startlingly loud and Gerald Hawxhurst's head snapped to one side. He broke into a kind of dance step, then slid sideways to the ground and lay still, a dusty heap of expensive clothing.

Later, when they searched his locked luggage at the Indian Queen, they found the penciled draft of a note offering one thousand dollars for Lester Royce in *The Loves of Daisy*, by Mrs. Craik.

Reading that later, Coe Neely shook his head and breathed, "The man who corrupted corruption."

But now, on this Saturday afternoon under the gallows, he could scarcely breathe at all.

A black hood was jerked down around Tracy Silleck's head and tied under his chin. The dyed cotton stretched horizontally when he grinned in defiance at what he had done.

A dog started yapping happily over by the stage station, having treed Mr Tiver's cat.

Silleck squeezed his eyes shut in the

hot darkness of the hood, and swallowed for the last time. His grin collapsed and he sobbed, "I'm coming, Tecums—"

The trap vibrated under his strapped feet and he was free in space and then lightning flashed through his skull.

The dog yapped on and on, daring the cat to come down and roughhouse. It stopped only when an ominous sound like that of a wheatsack hitting cement thuttered across town and echoed away over the prairie and died in the empty distances beyond.

Franz Josef Rauschenbach opened his regular Saturday concert that afternoon with the rousing *Rye Whisky, Rye Whisky, For Whisky I Cry*—more to drown out the strangled shriek of the engine whistle than for any particular personal liking for the song. And Mildred Lane, walking away from the music on Coe Neely's arm, had to brush several angry tears from her eyes before she could hold her parasol against the sunlight, and go forward with Coe.

THE END





Big Knife

By WILL C. BROWN

The sergeant had always said, "Some-day I'm going to get me an army of my own and run it to suit myself."

WE FORDED THE RED on a cold March day when the river was high, but all the troubles we'd had to get there with the Double S trail herd wouldn't hold a candle to what would lay across the Territory. And every hand knew it.

Riding as trail foreman for a cob of a boss like Clabe Danner would have been no picnic anyway. But on top of his cactus disposition Danner was penny-pincher enough to try to go up the Chisholm with only ten riders for his two thousand head of the wildest

longhorns ever to start to market.

And now we were pushing the herd into Indian country. The Red River fording was behind us but somewhere in those wilds ahead was the Cherokee bandit called Big Knife with the slickest band of trail pirates ever to stray from the reservations.

It reminded me a little of my foot-soldiering days as a kid in Louisiana, and a Pennsylvania sergeant named Bill O'Brien. Maybe the Louisiana action wasn't the biggest fighting of the Civil War but those Rebels contested us every bloody step of the way. This O'Brien used to get awful mad about the way the war was run, when we'd walk into a Rebel ambush. The sergeant, who was Irish but tall, beak-nosed and black as an Indian, and just as crafty, used to go around saying, after some idiot officer had blundered at something, "Some day I'm going to get me an army of my own and run it to suit myself."

The sergeant deserted and never was heard of again, but that saying of his kept coming back to me after I was working for Danner.

The way Danner ramrodded the hellish river fording was like some of those officers that ran the war in Louisiana. I told the hands that night that by gaddy I was going to get me an outfit of my own some day and run it to suit myself.

The idea of Jodie Thomas ever owning a cattle outfit was funny but everybody was too fagged out to laugh.

One thing I did do though, without saying anything to Danner. I tried to get the word out on the trail ahead that no band of thieving reservation jumpers was going to bleed the Double S herd into the poorhouse on this drive.

There were a few stray Indians hanging around the settlement store where we crossed, pretending not to be listening, when I made that boast. I said it big and loud, two or three times. I knew the word would drift ahead up the trail.

That's the way you had to do it with Indians. You act a little timid and they'd have half your beef herd before you ever sighted Kansas. But you show 'em a few rifle muzzles, and let it be known you understand what a trigger's on a gun for, and you'd get shed of them by giving just a few cooking beeves.

So I said, "That goes for that Cherokee coyote Big Knife and his whole dirty crew, same as anybody else that thinks they can whittle up this herd. And you got Jodie Thomas's word for that!"

Three nights later we were in the wild country north of the Red. We had made forty miles since the fording, which was good time. And so far we hadn't

been pestered by a single redskin hunting party to hit us for cooking meat. I bragged a little at the campfire, saying I reckoned the news that Jodie Thomas was trail foreman for this herd had put all the red bandits to flight.

Turkey Davis, an old codger working his seventh trail drive, spat through his whiskers and allowed that the way he figured it, the Double S outfit was such a raggedy-seated bunch that Big Knife's tribe felt plumb sorry for us.

Our bragging was done a few hours too soon.

When the redskins came, it didn't happen at all like you'd expect. It showed those Cherokee outlaws were a lot more smart than anybody figured, and it happened so unexpected that all we could do was stand there half naked with our knees knocking.

Instead of making contact right on the trail in daylight like they usually did, and making palaver for a few crippled steers, and trailing them off and letting the herd go on its way, this blamed bunch jumped us in camp right before sunup.

Two of our men were on the last night-herd guard. The other eight of us, plus Danner and the cook, were mostly half asleep—boots off, guns off, and some still in blankets in just their union suits. When we looked up we saw about forty of the varmints ringed around camp like so many ugly ghosts in the gray haze. But there was nothing ghostly about the rifles they carried.

As I say, there wasn't much we could do but stand there with our knees knocking.

Nobody ever traded shots much with these raiding parties on the Chisholm, anyhow. The thing was, you usually could settle by giving them a few beeves from your drag. That was usually all

they wanted—meat. If you started a shooting dispute, no telling where you'd end up. There were a lot more Indians in the Territory than trail hands on anybody's drive and you can't carry on a running war when you are tied down by two thousand head of longhorns you're trying to deliver to market. A man's life was worth more than a dozen five-dollar cull cows.

So the idea was to pay your ransom cheap as you could and get on your way. But this deal looked different right from the start.

Danner spoke up in an uneasy voice. "All right, Turkey, see what they want. The rest of you men, don't move sudden."

Turkey Davis, who could handle some of their talk, carried on a jabber for a while with a one-eared old one who seemed to be the leader.

Then Turkey turned back to me and Danner.

"This here's a little complicated," he said. "They want fifty of our best cows and no cripples."

If Danner hadn't been so scared I think he would have busted his traces. It made me mad, too.

Danner said, "Talk some more, Turkey."

So Turkey and One-Ear jabbered a while longer. At one point, One-Ear got loud and excited and the forty rifles all seemed to wiggle together. Turkey shook his head and looked odd at me.

"It's still fifty cows," he said. "And that ain't all. They want you, Jodie."

I said, "Me?" meaning to roar the word, but it came out just a weak squeak.

"That's what he says," Turkey nodded. "They've heard Jodie Thomas was a right tough trail boss. Reckon your word got out all right, Jodie."

This conversation put all the Indians' eyes on me. Mr. Danner said, "What they want with Jodie?"

"Seems they want to take him along for a kind of hostage, way I get it," Turkey explained. "They'll take the cows and have Jodie here help drive 'em a ways to make sure we don't follow and burn any gunpowder. When they get a day's ride away they'll turn Jodie loose and he can rejoin the drive."

Danner nodded. "All right," he said. "If that's the way it's got to be let's get at it." He looked at me. "I don't see we got any choice."

I exploded. "You mean," I bellowed at Danner, "you going to let these slinkin' murderers carry me off? How do I know they'll turn me loose tonight?"

Danner turned his back.

Then, as if it was just a small matter, Turkey Davis studied his boot toes and said, "These here are Big Knife's men."

I stalked about the campfire giving off all the authority effects and cusswords I could, but it didn't do any good. The hands looked like they wanted me to get on with it, and the Indians looked like they were getting mad.

It was full of daylight now. Turkey said, "They want you and me to leave our guns here and go cut out the cows."

Nobody lifted a finger. I put on the rest of my clothes, left my gun belt in my bedroll, and looked hard at Danner.

"Some day," I said, "I'm going to get me an outfit of my own and run it to suit myself."

The upshot was that Turkey Davis and I cut out fifty choice cows from the herd under One-Ear's direction. And in a little while those reservation-jumpers were prodding the cows to the west, me

riding drag with One-Ear and setting my horse like a sack of old clothes.

Just before sundown we wound through a shallow cut and then there was a wide grassy valley. And, to my surprise, a scattered lot of grazing cattle. Looked almost like a ranch scene. We mixed our cows into this herd. I saw good grade cows, a scattering of calves and yearlings, a few bulls—all with a mixture of trail brands on them from outfits all over Texas.

In the distance was the camp—skin tents and a few pole houses.

"Adios, now, One-Ear," I said. "I'll be heading back."

One-Ear monkeyed with the rifle across his saddle and pointed toward the camp. "You go see Big Knife."

The chief of this tribe of cow pirates was about the last human on earth I wanted to meet face-to-face, especially remembering the brag I had made.

I said, "I'd like to, thanks, but Danner won't know which way to turn till I get back and take charge."

One-Ear said, "You go see Big Knife."

This wasn't part of the bargain. I felt limp along the spine, but there was no arguing with those rifles around me. I rode for the village, with One-Ear following close.

It was near dark when we got there. The squaws and kids didn't come running out to yelp and stick knives in me like I'd half expected. Everything was quiet. Even the dogs seemed peaceful. One-Ear guided me up to the biggest pole house. Its wall cracks were chinked with mud and a buffalo hide hung across the door.

I got down, sweaty and cold in the stomach, and One-Ear nudged me inside with gun muzzle.

When I got my eyes adjusted to the dark, I saw Big Knife. He sat huddled

up in blankets with a big black sombrero pulled low on his head. He motioned and I sat down on a wolf rug. I noticed the dirt floor was swept clean as marble and there wasn't the greenhide smell to things you'd expect in an Indian shack. A little fire flickered, warming the room and making shadows jig on the walls.

I couldn't see the big bandit's face very well in the gloom, but I knew he was looking me over from beneath that hat. I was wondering if that skinflint Danner and the hands would do anything if I never came back and decided that it would be just like them to keep driving, leaving my bones to bleach like a lot of others in the Territory.

I tried to think of something to say.

"You've developed yourself a real nice herd back there," I said. "Looks like you've practically set yourself up in the ranching business."

Big Knife didn't say anything. A smelly-looking powwow pipe hung on the wall alongside him. He started to reach out a hand for it. I thought, now we'll fire up and I'll have to trade smokes with him on that thing, then they'll run me through a gantlet or something.

But he drew his hand back and pointed at my shirt pocket.

"Smoke um paper," he grunted.

I pulled out the makings and passed them over. Big Knife rolled himself a cigarette.

One-Ear was back at the door. Big Knife talked to him and One-Ear translated for a while. Big Knife was asking about the cattle, the Kansas market, other herds coming up, all manner of questions about the drives and Texas and the cow business in general.

Then One-Ear moved aside and three

women came in. They were loaded with food, but I didn't much notice the grub. They were mighty pretty women for Cherokee squaws, much as I could see. One was tall and graceful, one was short and right curvy, and the young middle-size one was so good to look at that I almost forgot to eat the food they served us.

I heard horsehoofs outside. One-Ear was back at the door. He said he had my horse and I could ride. Big Knife grunted something and handed me a long-bladed knife with a fancy handle made from an antelope foot and woven rawhide scabbard.

One-Ear said, "Chief says you take his knife as present, show it Danner, maybe make you big man with trail crew to bring back knife you took off chief." I'd a swore he winked. I took the knife, saying much obliged to Big Knife, and already picturing my story

of how I wrestled with the Cherokee bandit, took his knife off of him, and made my escape. I'd have Danner and the boys respecting me the rest of that drive, you bet.

At the door I turned back for a last look at Big Knife. Mostly, though, I wanted another look at that middle-size wife of his. The three women were standing in the little firelight, and this one really was something to remember. I guess my thoughts showed on my face. She smiled, ever so barely.

I was out the door, then, and took the reins from One-Ear.

Big Knife, a tall and blanketed shadow in the dark, pushed aside the buffalo hide and watched me mount.

He said, "That middle-size one is named Fawn Wind but I call her Pat for short. I finally got me an army of my own, Jodie, and I run it to suit myself."

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Peaceful John

By KENNETH FOWLER

He disregarded the frontier code of law by the gun. Nobody expected him to last six months. . . .

JOHN REMSBERG reined up the dun in front of the ranch house's weed-fringed doorstep, halting the buckboard. The low-roofed weathered abode stood commandingly on a ridge overlooking a coffee-colored creek which lost itself in sinuous wandering a half mile distant, in a motte of cottonwoods.

Hunched forward on the buckboard seat, Remsberg sat motionless for a long moment and with an air of introspection gazed out upon the biggest, the wildest, the loneliest stretch of country he had ever seen. The sand and rock and tough, spiny vegetation molded into rolling hills that ran as far as the eye could reach. The sky above

them was an immaculate blue dome, anchored against remote peaks. The air of a fine September day fairly sparkled.

Savoringly, Remsberg drew its tang into his lungs. The view from what was now his own dooryard made him feel little—and big. Little because of its immensity. Big because it strangely gave him a sense of liberation and power. Because this land was so virginal and big, it built bigness in a man's thoughts.

His right foot dangled over the edge of the buckboard. He swung it idly, enjoying the warmth of the sun soaking through his frayed cotton shirt and into his solidly thewed shoulders. He wore

homespun breeches, and a campaign hat of the Union Army, stripped of its identifying insignia, lay cocked back on his broad head, exposing a swatch of straw-colored hair, flagrantly awry. His eyes, of a faded blue-denim hue, scanned the horizon with a fixed look of abstraction.

Ja. He nodded solemnly to himself, reflecting. *A land like this puts a fever in a man. It works into his blood and bones, like the feeling he can get from one special woman.* And suddenly he wondered. Was it the land stirring this peculiar restlessness in him, or the still vivid image of the girl he had met at Ellsworth's Mercantile this morning, when he had bought his supplies?

Of her he must not think. An aristocrat. He had heard of the Ellsworths, one of the oldest families in the region. Their house on the outskirts of town was the biggest in the neighborhood, and Abby Ellsworth had been raised as a lady of quality. Undoubtedly she worked in her father's prosperous business establishment only now and then, for something to do. And what was he? Ten years ago he had landed on the shores of this country, in New York, from the deck of a cattle boat.

Dream then, John Remsberg. But do not be a fool!

There had been a way about her, though—a frank and open manner almost blunt, yet inoffensive.

She had called him at once by his name, as if knowing all about him, and when he had shown surprise at this, her eyes, a soft and smoky gray, had twinkled. "This is the town's gossip forum, Mr. Remsberg," she had told him, smiling. "You are the man they call 'Peaceful John', aren't you—the one who is taking over the old August Remsberg place?"

It was more a statement than a question and he merely nodded, seeming really to see her then for the first time—a slender, vital girl wearing a dress of some woolly dark green material and with black hair that shone like ice where it was plaited at the nape of her neck into a graceful chignon.

"Why do they call you 'Peaceful', Mr. Remsberg?"

He looked down at her searchingly. "It is funny—that name?"

"Yes and no. It is, applied to you, I guess," and her eyes frankly measured his stalwart frame.

She made him think of an impudent puppy, teasing for attention. He said: "It is not funny in the North, not to carry a gun," and pondered solemnly. "Here it is a big joke, if a man does not?"

"It's unusual. Times are unsettled. Most ranchers wear them—for self-protection."

He held up his big fists before her. "These are my protection. I fought in the war for the Union. I have seen enough of guns. Now we are all neighbors again."

"Even neighbors quarrel, Mr. Remsberg. Down here you are less apt to meet trouble with a gun, than without one."

"I mind my own business. I have no trouble." And he handed her the scrap of paper on which he had methodically written down the list of staples he required.

She apparently noticed his cautious pricing of each item as she laid it upon the counter, for when the order was completed, her mention of credit had an overdrawn casualness.

"Your uncle always ran an account here," she told him. "Pay us when you are able."

Color sprang in his cheeks as he spread the coins from a worn money pouch before her.

"I am able to pay for what I buy."

"Do you know what I suspect, Mr. Remsberg? I suspect that you are being foolishly proud! I could see only a few coins left in your purse."

Her outspokenness faintly shocked him. He stared at her and was surprised at the briefness of his discomfiture. Her words were blunt, but without sting. Popcorn cracked, but then you saw the golden kernel. And caught the savor. Her straight way of looking at him was not bold, but had simply an unaffected human curiosity—a kind of warmth. Then he noticed her hands, and had a sinking awareness of the gap between them. They were slim and unroughened, with fingers meant for delicately holding a wine glass or skimming gracefully over the keys of a piano. The hands of a lady.

Without visible effort, he hoisted the heavy gunnysack of provisions and heaved it across his shoulder. Then he picked up the pouch.

"This pouch will not remain empty," he said stiffly.

"Of course it won't! You should do very well, if you go after mavericks. I have heard of some fine herds being built up that way."

The warm animation in her voice made him instantly ashamed.

"Yes," he agreed, "I would like to build up a herd," and for an instant felt an awkward interrogation in their crossed glances.

"You must visit us again when you are in town."

"These stores will last me a long time."

"You will not want your nose at the grindstone all the time." She smiled.

"Unless you intend to become a hermit."

Now, sitting hipshot on the buckboard's straw-cushioned seat, John Remsberg tried to shut her from his thoughts as he stared out over the ranch's run-down outbuildings. He had his supplies. Now he must get to work. There was brush to be cleared, sheds to be repaired, and somewhere out there in the *brasada* he must build a holding pen for the mavericks he hoped to rope and brand. A man could not let himself be distracted and still do the job he had to do here.

She had worn paper sleeve guards over the lacy cuffs of her blouse, so as not to soil them. And so tiny she had looked, standing beside him. Just one of his hands would have gone around her waist.

But the cattle. They must come first. Cattle that had multiplied extravagantly during the war years, and now could be legally claimed by the first man to go out and dab his loop on them.

Ach!—but those dainty hands of hers. Wives of ranchers he had seen, waiting for their husbands in buckboards and spring wagons in town, had not had such hands.

Ja. The cattle first. And up North, in centers like Abilene, Ellsworth, Dodge City, were the buyers, ready and waiting, and already great dusty herds were thundering northward across the plains, and opportunity was for the foremost.

The hands of the ranchers' wives had been reddened and ugly—work hands. But was that all a man wanted of his woman—work?

Squinted against the brassy sunlight, John Remsberg's eyes built their dream as he stared out over the craggy,

tawny hills. He shook his head, slowly, thoughtfully. No, he must not let himself be sidetracked. Besides, there was the talk about him in town—and what woman would want a man who disregarded the country's frontier code of law by the gun, and thus held himself up to scorn and ridicule?

Damnyankee carpetbagger! Won't last here six months. All those backhanded whisperings and slyly amused glances he encountered now, whenever he was seen in town.

Peaceful John. . .

He broke with a start from his introspection. Two riders had come up to the edge of the ranch yard and now sat saddle there, blowing their lathered horses as they talked briefly together, staring down at him. Then, suddenly, they swung their mounts into the yard, and reining in alongside the buckboard, dismounted.

One of the men was broad and stocky, with heavily jowled jaws and chilly eyes that lay on Remsberg with a studying fixity. His companion was small, almost runty. He sucked on the stub of a brown paper cigarette, his amber-toned eyes narrowed against a twirl of smoke.

The bigger man stepped up beside the buckboard. Name of Dan Shiffley," he said, and stretched out his hand. With faint surprise, Remsberg met it. Shiffley nodded across his shoulder. "My partner, Maxie Fass."

Fass's head jerked slightly.

"I am pleased to meet neighbors," Remsberg said.

Shiffley grunted. "Heard in town you were cakin' over here. Waste your time on a cocklebur outfit like this."

"Is so?" Remsberg asked mildly, but Shiffley ignored the remark.

"Come to offer you a job," he said.

"Pay you fifty cents a head on every cow you can put in my Dollar S iron. Get the hang of it, you could do six a day, easy."

"Three dollars a day," Fass said. "Good pickin's for a greener."

Remsberg's mouth made a closed smile.

"Then I pick for myself—no?"

Shiffley looked at Fass. "Didn't I tell you, Maxie?" His glance swung to the sack of provisions canted against the back of the buckboard seat. "All set to lay in his store-boughts—see? Too almighty proud to hire out and turn a quick dollar."

Remsberg flushed. "I did not say it that way! I—"

"Only we got no hard feelin's, have we, Maxie?" Shiffley broke in. "Let's give Peaceful John here a hand with that sack."

Remsberg was not quick enough, leaping out of the buckboard. Shiffley was already at the back of the rig, tugging on the loaded gunnysack. As Remsberg lunged to seize it from him, the top fell open and its contents spewed out.

"Dog-gone!" Shiffley looked dumbly surprised as his boot tramped heavily on a paper sack of sugar, splitting it open, and then Remsberg was roughly fending him aside.

"Leave it! I will take care of this." Remsberg was stooped over and reaching out as Shiffley straightened suddenly and kicked him idly in the right temple.

Momentarily stunned, he saw Max Fass's spindly figure poised about him as he tried to raise himself. The gun in Fass's fist swished down at him in a glittering arc. He groaned and collapsed across the empty gunnysack. Everything went black.

ABBY ELLSWORTH was putting on her hat, primping before a mirror in back of the counter, when John Remsberg walked into Ellsworth's Mercantile for the second time in one day. An austere-looking man in his middle years stood behind the counter near her, and from just a passing glance Remsberg knew this must be her father. Clayton Ellsworth had the same fine, delicately boned features, the same smoky swirls in his granite-cool eyes.

Abby caught his reflection in the mirror as he shuffled hesitantly up to the counter, and as she spun around and their eyes met, color surged into their faces at the same instant.

"Why—Mr. Remsberg! This—this visit is sooner than I had expected."

Embarrassment at her mistake sank deeper color into his high cheekbones. "I—I do not make a visit," he blurted awkwardly. "I have come to buy more things."

"Oh! I see." Her voice chilled faintly before she caught herself and hastily erased the note of pique from it. "You forgot some items. And I judged you for the kind who never forgets anything."

"I did not forget the items.

"But you just said—"

He interrupted humbly: "Forgive me that I do not make it clear. There was out at my place a little—fuss. You could perhaps credit me for the same order again—no?"

A startled look crossed her face, then shock spread fully over it as she noticed the bruised swelling at his right temple, where Dan Shiffley's spur had raked it open.

"You were hurt!" she exclaimed.

"It is nothing."

"Who did this, John?" His given name burst from her before she was aware of it.

She covered her confusion by angrily shaking her head. "If you had taken my advice and worn a gun, this would not have happened."

"A gun?" He looked at her doggedly. "A gun I would forget I had."

"Who did this? Who did it?" she demanded tensely.

He told her about Shiffley and Fass, ending it lamely: "Next time I will be prepared for such monkey business. I would have invited them in for a *klaatsche*. A neighborly call, I am thinking, when I see them come into my dooryard."

"A neighborly call! And they beat you up and destroyed your supplies!" Abby Ellsworth bristled. "I've heard of those sneaking carpetbaggers! Cheap Northern trash! I—" She stopped suddenly, a furious blush mantling her cheeks. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to—"

"It is all right. We are all under the same flag now."

She swung abruptly, her glance going to where Clayton Ellsworth stood, his eyes narrowed and dour, shuttling between them.

"Father, this is John Remsberg. You knew that he was taking over the old Remsberg place."

"I knew that, yes. I have also heard talk in town about Mr. Remsberg that has not been favorable."

"You have heard nothing but a sly whispering campaign spawned in some dirty saloon! That has nothing to do with this. Credit for a few staples."

"I also overheard your conversation with him just now," replied Clayton Ellsworth coldly. "What happened out there today at his ranch can happen again. A storekeeper cannot afford to pour molasses into a leaky barrel."

"But Father! This is not a leaky barrel.

Mr. Remsberg owns a ranch. He is not a— a saddle tramp!”

“I did not say that he was. But if slander has been spoken against him, he cannot honorably ignore it.”

“Is ‘Peaceful’ a slanderous word, Father?”

“It is, when spoken with intent to defame.”

“It is not when spoken by a vicious little clique of drunkards and town riff-raff who have not the courage to come out and speak it to his face! Mr. Remsberg may not have fought on our side in the war, but he was a soldier. He is not a coward! He—”

John Remsberg’s voice trembled out across her words. “It is no matter. Thank you. I will try at the Eagle Mercantile.” And he turned to go.

A slow comprehension broke in Clayton Ellsworth’s eyes as Abby spun around, facing him. “Father,” she demanded fiercely, “have you ever lost a single dollar from credit I have written for this store?”

“Why—why no, Abby. I don’t guess I have. But—”

“You have not and you will not! Anyway, it is not the money you are concerned about—or need to be!”

Abby’s voice shook. Clayton Ellsworth stared with a numbed look at her flashing eyes, at the sudden pallor skirting the frail line of her mouth. She swished around, and the impelling vehemence of her voice halted John Remsberg just as he reached the door.

“Mr. Remsberg! Wait!”

REGULARLY, after that, two nights each week, John Remsberg drove in to Banderita to see Abby Ellsworth. The fact was accepted in town now. Abby Ellsworth and the carpetbagger who had

inherited Gus Remsberg’s old siwash outfit were goin’ steady. Clayton Ellsworth’s daughter—the younger, sassier one. Clayton’s only boy had died of a Federal bullet at Bull Run. One of the first to volunteer. And now Miss Abby, apple of the old man’s eyes, tarry-hootin’ around with a damn’ blue-belly. Be a scandal, surer than hell-fire, if a match come of it.

The town gossip. The sly winks and covert whisperings. They ignored it all. They were too busy with each other, moving alone and uncaring in a world apart, and content just to hold their dream.

After a long day’s work out in the *brasada* John Remsberg was usually exhausted, yet the satisfaction he derived in making the ten-mile drive in to town and reporting his progress to Abby more than compensated him for the hardship the trip entailed. He had better than three-score of cows put in his iron now, and penned up in a boxed canyon, a mile from the house. Sentimentally he had chosen 7T6 as his brand—the year in which he would take Abby for his bride and start his new life in this new and wonderful land.

With the last of his savings, money he had kept cached under a loose board in his kitchen floor, he had bought a good rope horse and a pair of home-tanned *armitas*, and while he had not yet become a skilled rider he had quickly caught on to the knack of throwing a rope, and the muscles in his corded arms and anvil-thick shoulders were strong as a bull’s.

He had never been to her home. Their meeting place was the dingy lobby of the hotel, and from there they took long walks together, sometimes strolling far out of town, often filled with chatter and as often not, and as content when

they were silent as when they talked. Then one night she stopped and looked straight at him. "You have not met my older sister. Saturday I want you to call on me at home."

To pay his call, he put on the only store-boughten suit he had. And in the Ellsworths' fine front parlor he sat stiff and awkward on the horsehair sofa beside her, unused to such elegance and feeling confused and uneasy in spite of her efforts to put him at ease.

Abby's older sister, Tilda, who had babied her from the time she was ten, when their mother had died, finally came in to be introduced, a prim, severe-looking young woman with a tight-drawn mouth and eyes that seemed to skim over John Remsberg in unspoken derogation. With grudging clemency she went through the formality of sipping a cup of tea with them, then quickly excused herself. Clayton Ellsworth did not make even this pretense of hospitality. Coat and hat across his arm, he accorded John Remsberg a brusque nod as he passed through the room, saying, "Good evening, Sir," and then marched on stiffly to the door.

"Watching Abby sitting erectly beside him, in hurt dignity, John Remsberg felt her misery more than he did his own. He stood abruptly.

"I told you it would not work out. They do not want me in this house, Abby."

With an angry gesture, Abby shook out her skirt and rose. "Then they do not want me here, either."

John Remsberg's big hand motioned over the richly appointed room. "I cannot give you fine things like this, Abby."

Her vehemence startled him. "John Remsberg, you are a fool!"

"I am not welcome here, Abby. I will not come again."

"You will not have to."

"It is not much I can offer you."

"It is enough that I will have you, John."

A week later they were quietly married in the little Baptist parsonage on lower Main Street. The Reverend Adam Doan and his wife were the only witnesses.

HE IMPROVED his holding pen and learned to throw a hooley-ann, and time like a great wheel slowly ground its grist of days, and his herd increased, and Abby was going to have a baby. It was so. Not for months yet, but the doctor in Bandera had assured them. He prayed it would be a boy. A son and heir for the greatness of what he would some day build here. His dream stretched in bigness. An empire of golden hides and ivory horns. Great herds with his 7T6 branded on each brute's flank, and streaming northward in a never-ending tide. In this vast land the imagination spilled over, for there was no bottom to its well-springs.

He grew lean and saddle-hammered from his work in the *brasada*, and there were upwards of a hundred and fifty cows in his pen now. He could get two, maybe three dollars a head for these, in Bandera. He would take it. He would drive to town soon, with Abby, and make the necessary arrangements. With three hundred dollars in his pocket—*ja*, maybe more!—he would buy her a fine present. And build another room on the house. *Ja, ja*. Time did not stand still. Soon they would be needing it.

But he was not always happy, coming in at dusk, exhausted from a hard day working the brush, even though Abby usually was at the door to meet him, her

arms often flour-powdered from baking, and her greeting kiss was something he looked forward to the whole day through. He had noticed that she had seemed strangely quiet and preoccupied of late, and this worried him. Women in a delicate condition were prone to the vapours, he knew. It could be that. Or it could be that she was pining for the softer, easier life that she had left behind her, in Bandera.

With a few of the personal belongings that she brought here from her home, she had titivated up their bedroom until it seemed almost as pretentious as a room in Clayton Ellsworth's big house in town. There was an old walnut high-boy, with curved brass handles which she assiduously polished every day; a huge mirror framed in cherrywood, and a dainty cherrywood chair, with legs so thin and fine that he had never dared sit in it; and a great walnut four-poster bed, so wide that it left only a narrow space on one side of the small room, to come in to it.

By comparison, the rough-hewn furniture that August Remsberg had made for the living-room looked poor and shabby. When the bedroom door was open the mirror reflected the living-room's drabness, and John Remsberg took an aversion to it, since it seemed to rebuke him for the littleness of what he had been able to give her, in contrast to the bigness of his dream.

Then one night when they were in the kitchen, finishing supper, he learned what was troubling her—not her condition, nor a yearning for geegaws and fripperies beyond their present means, but simply concern over him.

"John," she said out of a clear sky while he sat packing his pipe and watching the lamplight play over the frail planes

of her face, "it is too quiet. I have been expecting something to happen, and it has not."

"Something to happen?" He knew immediately what she was driving at. He did not want her to know that he knew. "Ja. It has been quiet. And peaceful." He held a match poised, looking at her. "But you do not call it something happening when we have one hundred and fifty cows in our holding pen?"

"You know what I am talking about, John Remsberg!"

He scratched the match alight and applied it to the charred bowl of his meerschau, puffing a moment before answering: "Ja. You are talking of Dan Shiffley. That is finished. There is no more trouble."

"I know that shirttail Shiffley clan! And I think you should carry a gun."

He sighed, relaxing in his chair. "You are very beautiful when you look so serious, *liebchen*."

"Do not put me off with sweet-talk!"

"There is a rifle in the house."

"A blunderbuss, you mean! You should wear a side arm. It won't mean you are looking for trouble. Just that you'll be ready, if it should come."

"Fiddle-faddle."

"Don't you fiddle-faddle me! You cannot let yourself be run over, John. Or let anyone think you can be."

"No one is going to run over me, *liebchen*."

"We are just out of coffee." Abruptly, Abby rose and began clearing the table. "Tomorrow you can drive me to town in the buckboard. And if you will not buy a gun, I will buy one for you."

"Tomorrow is fine. Tomorrow while you buy your coffee and guns, I will see the cattle buyer, Estes Trenholm. Three hundred dollars we will have,

Abby. We will shoot up the town together—*nein?*”

She did not answer him. It was their first quarrel.

ALL DURING their drive to town the next morning Abby sat beside him withdrawn and silent, and their quarrel was still unresolved when they arrived finally at the Eagle Mercantile, where, since Abby's estrangement from her family, they had done what little trading had been necessary for them. But the real blow had not fallen until half an hour later, after he had talked with Estes Trenholm in the lobby of Huffmeyer's Hotel and afterward had rushed across the street to the Bandera county clerk's office, spurred by a wild hope that the cattle buyer might have been mistaken in what he had told him. Trenholm had not been mistaken.

In the county clerk's office, he could feel his heart's dull, panicked hacking against his ribs as he stared at the clerk's smugly calm face.

“You—you are sure of this?” he blurted out tensely. “There is—no chance of mistake?”

“We don't make that kind of mistake here, Mister. There it is—right in the book.” The clerk jabbed his pencil at an inked notation in the ledger opened before him. “Brand 7T6—registered in the name of one Max Fass.” He thumped the ledger shut. “Looks like you ain't got no cattle, Mister—till you ketch you some more. Even a greener should savvy you can't legally claim a brand in this county till it's re-corded.”

John Remsberg wheeled slowly and stumbled out of the office. Outside he stood tracked for a long moment on the board walk, staring around him with the vacantly disconcerted look of a man suddenly realizing that he has

become lost. Finally, lurching around, he broke distractedly into a long-gaited stride, heading downstreet.

His brain whirled. He had been played upon for a fool, and a fool he was. A *dumkopf*, unworthy to possess a ranch, or a wife like Abby. Had not she warned him, again and again? But even Abby had taken it for granted he must be aware of this simple, commonly known rule about registering brands. Who, but a dolt like himself, would not have known about it? And last night, when she had again warned him against Shiffley, what had he done but strut before her like a stupid jackass and make a joke of her advice!

Ja, it was his own stupid pride and conceit that had brought him to this. And because he was such a simpleton this herd he had toiled so hard to collect now belonged legally to Max Fass. Or to Fass and Shiffley, since they were undoubtedly in on this deal together. No doubt they had already driven the gatherment to their own pens. And there was not a thing he could do about it. With a sinking despair, he remembered the clerk's words. *Looks like you ain't got no cattle, Mister—till you ketch you some more*. How would he ever be able to face Abby—now?

I cannot, he thought miserably. *I cannot do it*. He lost all awareness of time and was far out of town when he awoke suddenly to the fact that he had been walking steadily for almost an hour. He turned and started back.

There was no prelude to it. He was on lower Main Street and passing the Steamboat Saloon when the batwings swung open and there was Dan Shiffley. Without a word he walked up to Shiffley and struck him across the face. Shiffley's eyes stretched in started recognition as he made a bull-like rush at

him, but the fight did not last long. His pent-up fury had needed this outlet and his final cudgeling blow belted Shiffley up off his feet.

There was a nebulousness and unreality to the rest of it. The blurred sea of faces circled around him. Shiffley blundering to his feet, and the bloody pincers of his mouth opening to gust the savage, wheezed-out words.

"All right, damn you, all right! Now you get a gun or be out of town by noon."

The sea of faces becoming a wall, a wall of prejudice and hostility shutting off the sun and sky and the dream he had brought to this harsh raw land. John Remsberg rammed his knotted shoulders against the wall and it broke. He began walking away from it. He knew it was still there, reforming, behind him. He knew there was one way to break it, permanently. Only one.

THE OWNER of the hardware store had let in the first ray of light. As he had stood at the counter, buckling on the new, shiny Walker pistol, the storekeeper told him: "Punch it at him fast, Mister. Dan Shiffley's bad medicine. He's quick on the pull."

The first ray. . . . Was it the beginning of full, clear light? The first breach in the wall? Outside the store, under its wooden awning, Remsberg heaved a sigh. Until he had asked to look at guns, the storekeeper had been as aloof and withdrawn toward him as those others had been earlier, in front of the Steamboat. With his intentions made clear, a constrained, grudging kind of friendliness had come over the man. It was wrong. Ironically, stupidly wrong that his mere strapping on of a gun belt should have made this difference.

Absently, Remsberg's hand stroked down against the unfamiliar weight of the holster sagging from his hip. But wasn't there, perhaps a degree of rightness in it too? No one could deny the wrongness of the method. But did not the method stem from necessity?

And Remsberg felt, now, that he had found his answer to that. *Progress is slow, he thought, and where the law is weak, men must be strong. Custom is not changed by a few, or in a day.*

He moved out from the shelter of the awning, sensitive to a sudden preternatural quiet and seemed to have descended upon the town. The board walks were deserted, buckboards and spring wagons stood unattended at the hitch rails. And this was Saturday. Something portentous and unnatural about it pulled at Remsberg's taut nerves.

The word has gone out, he thought somberly. And suddenly it hit him. The stillness was not complete. Behind it lay a muted overtone, a vague humming sound, like the drone of voices in a theater before the curtain rises and the play begins. And then he noticed the pulled-back window curtains, the eyes peering at him from shadowy doorways. Oddly, though, the eyes seemed neither friendly nor unfriendly, but only stiffly, curiously expectant.

Unconsciously his pace had adjusted to the slow, stalking gait of a hunter's, and at this moment he remembered the hardware merchant's words, and an odd feeling of stimulation rose in him. *Punch it at him fast, Mister.* There had been a ring of sincerity in the man's voice; maybe there were others who felt as he did. Maybe, today, he did not walk alone. . . .

He caught a sharp ammonia reek as he was passing Neubauer's Livery and

he was just beyond it when the voice floated after him from the wide stable doorway.

"He's still down at the Steamboat. Walk up on him easy, Yank."

He did not look back, but a sudden warm tightness tingled in his throat as he paced on, swallowing vainly against it. And then his belly plunged coldly. Forward a block, sharp noon sunlight glinted on the brass ship's bell hanging above the doorway of the Steamboat Saloon. And two doors below, on the opposite side of the street, the white-painted falsefront of Ellsworth's Mercantile canted its low wooden awning out over the board walk.

Abby, thought Remsberg. *Is she there—in the store?* And then he remembered, and relief was like a strong, warming drink in his belly. Abby had not been to the store or seen her father since the day of their marriage.

His pace slowed. He was less than a hundred yards from the Steamboat now. Abby. His *suessliebchen*. So little he had been able to do for her. And now—a few months only—and the baby would come. Of that he must not think. A boy. A boy it must be. He had prayed for that. He had talked solemnly, with God. So that if anything happened to him, now—

Now! Now it would be, or it would not be. Like walking out of a dark cave against a tearing wind. It grabs your breath. Your lungs suddenly are dry and empty.

The Steamboat's batwings swung open and flapped shut behind Dan Shiffley. His chilly eyes accosted Remsberg's. He was smoothing a finished cigarette between his fingers and as Remsberg halted he did a disdainful thing. He scratched a match against his black

whipcord breeches and idly touched its flame to the tip of the cigarette.

Remsberg sensed a wrongness in the picture. Shiffley was bluffing. He could not feel that sure. The range. That must be it. The range was not right yet. Shiffley was trying to panic him into a fast draw, into making a wild first shot. Then . . .

A cramping numbness was in Remsberg's legs as he started moving them again. He remembered that feeling. At Sharpsburg. The bridge over Antietam Creek. Elements of General Toombs' 2nd and 20th Georgia Regiments had held it. Warren's Brigade was ordered to cross. And under deadly enfilading fire of those Rebel sharpshooters they had crossed. And on legs that had felt like brittle sticks, he, John Remsberg, had crossed. . . .

"Don't slow down, Dutch!" Shiffley's voice carried a jeering vehemence, reaching him. "You got sand enough in your craw, keep a'comin'."

It was a trick. Shiffley was egging him on. Trying deliberately to provoke him into a blunder. But how much longer could Shiffley wait?

Remsberg moved on, doling each step, feeling the pressure within him now, like a slowly tightening spring. He estimated sixty feet, fifty. Then forty.

Shiffley spat the cigarette from his mouth. He still did not move.

Suddenly the odd prescient feeling in Remsberg sharpened. Something about Shiffley's studied unconcern struck a false note. Remsberg halted.

And at that moment the shot blared. *Not from Shiffley's gun.* The realization rang a warning in Remsberg. *Don't turn. Don't turn!* The vital split-second advantage that should have been Shiffley's

tipped in Remsberg's favor. Shiffley's eyes were stretched in a look of shocked disbelief staring past Remsberg and as he recovered to start his draw Remsberg cleared leather first and fired.

The mighty, wallowing report bounced between the street's false-fronts and skirled away in a fading rataplan of echoes. Shiffley had the appearance of a man vaguely preoccupied by a need to sit down suddenly. He took a squatting position as his knees buckled, holding onto his belly. And as he rocked backward and down, he gave the grotesque impression of a person who has had a chair abruptly drawn from under him.

Remsberg turned. All along Main, doors were opening and people were pouring into the street. Already a sizeable crowd had gathered in front of Ellsworth's Mercantile, and Remsberg stared vacantly at it for a long moment before suddenly recognizing Clayton Ellsworth's tall, spare figure standing at its forefront. Shock froze his eyes then. A big Walker pistol hung slackly in Ellsworth's right hand, and as Remsberg swung his head, following the storekeeper's fixed forward gaze, he abruptly went rigid.

The body lay sprawled on the board walk in front of Buckley's saddle shop, twenty feet from the mercantile. Max Fass's head dangled over the walk's high edge, his skinny arms outthrust like those of a swimmer arrested in the midst of a breast stroke. The gun he had never come to fire lay in the gutter beneath his right hand, glittering diamondlike in the bright sunlight.

Fass! Clayton Ellsworth had shot Fass! Light burst through the fogginess in Remsberg's brain as he stared at the crumpled body. Now, like the final

piece of a picture puzzle falling into place, it was all complete for him. While Shiffley had been baiting him on, from in front of the Steamboat, Fass had been moving stealthily out of that alley between the stores, intending to ambush him. And Ellsworth had seen him. That one shot he had heard. The shot that had brought the look of panic in Dan Shiffley's eyes. Shiffley had been faced toward Fass. He had seen it happen. And the shock had slowed his draw.

Remsberg's breath caught. He saw a jostling movement in the crowd. Then Abby had fought her way through it and was running toward him. When she was in his arms, his throat was too tight for words as she hugged him fiercely to her. He stroked her tumbled hair and at last got through the tightness to murmur, "*Liebchen*," feeling a giddy whirling in his head as she kept sobbing his name and punched her cheek deeper into the pit of his shoulder.

He had, at first, only a remote awareness of the other voice.

"... like to have sprained my wrist, gettin' the gun away from her. Ellsworth women always were a notional lot. Don't guess there's any way to cure 'em, either, except switch their bottoms when there's a needin' to."

Dazedly, Remsberg looked up and saw Clayton Ellsworth.

"What—what was that? I am sorry. I did not hear—"

The storekeeper's thin, pinched mouth relaxed slowly in a grin.

"You better never mind that part of it." The grin widened as John Remsberg stared down at the knotty fingers splayed out in front of him. "Shake hands, son," Clayton Ellsworth said. "And welcome to Texas."

Ha'nts or not, the Flying U boys were dead-game sports!

The Ghost of One Man Coulee



A "Happy Family" Story by B. M. Bower

HAPPY JACK, by some freak of misguided ambition, was emulating rather heavily the elfish imagination of Andy Green. He was engaged in the pleasant task of throwing a big load into the Native Son, who jingled his gorgeous silver spurs close alongside Happy's more soberly accoutered heel.

"That there," Happy was saying, with ponderous gravity, "is the shack where the old fiddler went crazy trying to play a tune like the wind—or some blamed-fool thing like that—and killed himself because he couldn't make it stick. It's haunted, that shack is. The old fellow's ghost comes around there moonlight nights and plays the fiddle in the door."

The Native Son, more properly chris-

tened Miguel, turned a languidly velvet glance toward the cabin and flicked the ashes from his cigarette daintily.

"Have you ever seen the ghost, Happy?" he asked indulgently.

"Ah—yes, sure! I seen it m'self," Happy lied boldly.

"And were you scared?"

"Me? Scared? Hunh!" Happy gave a fairly good imitation of dumb disgust. "Why, I went and—" Happy's imagination floundered in the stagnant pool of a slow-thinking brain—"I went right in and—"

"Exactly." Miguel smiled a smile of even white teeth and ironical lips. "Some moonlight night we will come back here at midnight, you and I. I have heard of that man, and I am fond

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of music. We will come and listen to him."

Some of the other boys, ambling up from behind, caught a part of the speech, and looked at one another, grinning.

"The Native Son's broke out all over with schoolbook grammar ag'in," Big Medicine remarked. "Wonder what Happy's done? I've noticed, by cripes, that the guilty party better duck, when that there Miguel begins to talk like a schoolma'am huntin' a job! Hey, there!" he bellowed suddenly; "What's this here music talk I hear? Who's going to play, and where at, and how much is it a head?"

Miguel turned and looked back at the group, smiling still. "Happy was telling me about a ghost in that cabin down there." He flung out a hand toward the place so suddenly that his horse jumped, in fear of the quirt. "I say we'll come back some night and listen to the ghost. Happy says he frequently rides over to hear it play on moonlight nights, and—"

"Aw, g'wan!" Happy Jack began to look uncomfortable in his mind. "I said—"

"Happy? If he thought there was a ghost in One Man Coulee, you couldn't tie him down and haul him past in a hayrack at noon," Andy asserted sharply. "There isn't any ghost."

Andy set his lips firmly together, and stared reminiscently down the hill at the lonely little cabin in the coulee. Memory flashed upon him vividly a picture of the night when he had sat within that cabin, listening to the man who would play the north wind, and who wept because it eluded him always; who played wonderfully—a genius gone mad under the spell of his own music—and at last rushed out into the

blizzard and was lost, seeking the north wind that he might learn the song it sang.

The scene gripped Andy, even in memory. He wondered fancifully if Olafson was still wandering with his violin, searching for the home of the north wind. They had never found him, not even when the snows had gone and the land lay bare beneath a spring sky. He must have frozen, for the night had been bitter, and a blizzard raged blindingly. Still, they had never found a trace of him.

There had been those who, after searching a while in vain, had accused Andy to his face of building the story to excite his fellows. If Andy told the truth, asked the doubters, where was Olafson's body? And who had ever tried to play the wind? Who, save Andy Green, would ever think of such a fantastic tale? Happy Jack, Andy remembered resentfully, had been unusually vociferous in his belief, even for him.

"Aw, you stuck to it there was all the makin's of a ghost," Happy defended awkwardly, and wished that Andy Green had not overheard the yarn he told Miguel. "Sure there's a ghost!" He fell back a step that he might wink at Big Medicine, and so enlist his sledgehammer assistance. "I leave it to Bud if we didn't hear it, one night—"

"And seen it, too, by cripes!" Big Medicine enlarged readily and shamelessly. "Standin' right in the door, playin' the fiddle to beat a straight flush." He glared around the little group with his protruding eyes until his glance met the curious look of Cal Emmett. "You was with us, Cal," he asserted loudly. "I leave it to you if we didn't see 'im and hear 'im."

Cal, thus sought to bear false witness, did so with amiable alacrity.

"We sure did," he declared.

"Funny you never said a word about it before," snapped Andy in open disbelief.

"We thought nobody'd believe us if we did tell it," Big Medicine explained.

"Pity yuh don't always think as close to the mark as yuh done then," Andy retorted.

"How do yuh know there ain't a ghost?" Big Medicine demanded with some slight rancor, born not of the argument, but of temporary ill feeling between the two. "Is it because yuh know, by cripes, that yuh lied last winter?"

Andy's lips tightened. "I've heard about enough of that," he said, with a flash of anger. With the cabin in sight, and recalling the tragedy of that night, he was not in the mood to wrangle good-naturedly about it with anyone—least of all with Big Medicine. "I didn't lie. I'm dead willing to back what I said about it with my fists, if—"

Big Medicine twitched the reins to ride close, but Miguel's horse sidled suddenly and blocked the move. Also, Miguel smiled guilelessly into the angry eyes of Big Medicine.

"Will you fellows come back with me tonight, then, and see the ghost?" he asked lightly. "Or don't you dare tackle it again?"

Big Medicine snorted and forgot his immediate intentions toward Andy. "You wouldn't dast come along, if we did," he glowered. "I'd camp there alone for a month, far as I'm concerned, if there was any grub, by cripes!"

"That shows how much you know about the place," put in Pink, siding with Andy. "Unless somebody's packed it away lately, there's all kinds of grub left. Maybe the flour, and bacon and

beans is gone, but there's enough pickles and stuffed olives to last—"

"Olives!" cried the Native Son and looked back longingly at the rugged bluff which marked One Man Coulee. "Say, does anybody belong to them olives?"

"Nobody but the ghost," grinned Pink. "We bought him twelve lovely bottles, just to please Jimmie; he told us there wasn't any sale for stuffed olives in Dry Lake and he offered 'em to us at cost. We did think o' taking all he had, but we cut it down to twelve bottles afterward. And Olafson never ate an olive all the time he was there!"

"And they're there yet, you say?" It was plain that Miguel was far more interested in the olives than he was in the ghost.

"Sure, they're there." Pink was not troubling to warp the truth, as Miguel decided after a sharp glance. "The stuff all belonged to Olafson and the shack belongs to the Old Man. And when Olafson went crazy over the wind, and froze to death," he stipulated distinctly, with a challenging glance at Big Medicine, "we all kept thinking at first he'd come back, maybe. But he never did—"

"Excepting his ghost, by golly!" put in Slim unexpectedly, with a belated snort of amusement at the idea.

"I'd rather," sighed Miguel, "have a dozen bottles of stuffed olives than a dozen kisses from the prettiest girl in the state."

"Mamma! They're easier to get, anyway. If you want 'em that bad—"

"That there ghost may have something to say about them olives," Happy Jack warned, sticking stubbornly to his story.

Miguel smiled—and there was that in his smile which sent four mendacious cowpunchers hot with resentment.

"Maybe yuh don't *believe* in that ghost, by cripes?" Big Medicine challenged indignantly, and gave Miguel a pale, pop-eyed stare meant to be intimidating.

Miguel smiled again as at some secret joke, and made no reply at all.

"Well—don't yuh *b'lieve* it?" Big Medicine roared after a minute.

Miguel smiled gently and inspected his cigarette; emotions might surge about this Native Son and beat themselves to a white froth upon the rock of his absolute imperturbability, as the Happy Family knew well. Now they rode close-grouped, intensely interested in this struggle between bull-bellowing violence and languid impassivity.

"You don't believe it yourself, do you?" Miguel inquired evenly at last, rousing from his abstraction. "Did you expect me to swallow hook, sinker, and all?"

Big Medicine looked positively murderous. "When I say a thing is so," he cried, "I expect, by cripes, that folks will take m' bare word for it. I don't have to produce no affidavies, nor haul in any witnesses. I ain't like Andy, here. You're dealin' now with a man that can look truth in the face and never bat an eye."

Miguel smiled again, this time more humanly amused. "I've met men before who hadn't a speaking acquaintance with Dame Truth," he drawled: "They looked her in the face, too—and she never recognized 'em."

Big Medicine was at that critical point where make-believe may easily become reality. He had been joshing and playing he was mad before; now his glare hardened perceptibly, so that more than one of the boys noticed the difference.

"Aw, if he don't want to believe it,

he don't have to," Happy Jack intercepted Big Medicine's belligerent speech. "Chances is them olives'll stay where they're at a good long while, though—if Mig-u-ell has to get 'em after dark."

Miguel smoked while he rode ten rods. "I offered to come and listen to the ghost fiddle his fastest," he observed at last, "and not one of you fellows took me up on it. Tonight I'll come alone and get those olives. I guess I can carry twelve bottles, all right."

"It's no use tonight," Cal Emmett objected. "It's only on moonlight nights—"

He looked a question at Big Medicine. "Moonlight it's got to be. There ain't a moon till—"

"I can find stuffed olives any old kind of a night." Miguel blew the ashes from his cigarette. "It's the olives I want, amigo. I don't give a whoop for your ghost."

"Aw, I betcha yuh *dassent* come when it's moonlight, just the same," cried Happy Jack. "I betcha ten dollars yuh *dassent*."

It was nearly noon, and they were hungry, and headed toward camp; but despite their haste they argued the foolish question of whether the cabin in One Man Coulee was haunted. Six of them maintained stubbornly that it was—for Irish began to side with Happy Jack just because he did not like the Native Son very well, and that ironical smile of Miguel's irritated him to a degree; and Jack Bates also espoused the ghost because he scented an opportunity for excitement. The minority, composed of Miguel, Pink, Andy Green, and Weary, confined themselves largely to sarcasm—which is the oil which feeds fastest the flames of dissension.

The four rode together into camp ten

paces ahead of the six, and they talked in low tones among themselves mostly. When they did deign to look at the six, their glances were unfriendly, and when they spoke their speech was barbed so that it stung the listeners. The six retaliated vigorously—the more so because they had been silly enough in the first place to declare their belief in the nonexistent, and had been betrayed into making many ridiculous assertions which they were too obstinate to withdraw.

"Aw, say, I sure would like to put it on them fellers *good!*" Happy Jack growled to Cal and Jack Bates on the way to the corralled saddle bunch after dinner. Happy Jack was purple with wrath, for a caustic sentence or two spoken in Miguel's most maddening drawl was yet stinging his ears. "That there Native Son makes me *tired!* I wisht there *was* a ghost—I'd sure—"

"Oh, there's a ghost, all right," Jack Bates stated meaningly; "all yuh got to do is make one."

"Say, by golly!" Slim, close behind them, gulped excitedly. "Wouldn't it—"

"Say, don't let them faces get to leaking," Cal advised bluntly. "It's a whole week till the moon's good. Shut up!"

Slim goggled at him, caught the hazy beginning of an idea, grinned, and stepped over the rope into the corral. He was grinning when he caught his horse, and he was still grinning widely while he cinched the saddle. He caught Andy Green eying him suspiciously, and snickered outright. But he went his way, believing that he had given no hint of what was in his mind.

Slim and Happy Jack were alike in one respect; their minds worked slowly and rather ponderously—and, like other ponderous machinery, once in motion they were hard to stop. The others

would have left the subject alone, after that hour of hot argument, and in time would have forgotten it except for an occasional jeer, perhaps; but not so Happy Jack and Slim.

The Flying U outfit ate, saddled fresh horses, reloaded the mess wagon, and moved on toward Dry Creek, and that night flung weary bodies upon the growing grass in the shade of the tents, twenty miles and more from One Man Coulee and the little cabin with its grim history of genius blotted out in madness. Nevertheless, Slim searched ostentatiously with plate, knife, and fork in his hand, at suppertime, and craned his neck over boxes and cans, until he had the attention of his fellows, who were hungry, and elbowed him out of their way with scant courtesy.

"Say, Mig-u-ell, where's them stuffed olives?" he called at last. "I thought, by golly, we was goin' to have some olives for supper?"

"Olives—*stuffed* olives—are best picked by moonlight, they tell me," Miguel responded unemotionally, glancing up over his cup. "Have patience, amigo."

Slim nudged Happy Jack so that he spilled half his coffee and swore because it was hot, caught Big Medicine's pale-eyed glare upon him, and subsided so suddenly that he choked over his next sentence, which had nothing at all to do with olives, or ghosts, or insane fiddlers.

MEN NEVER QUITE LEAVE their boyhood behind them; at least, those men do not who live naturally and individually. It was that tenacious element which started Irish, Cal Emmett, Jack Bates, and Big Medicine to tilting hat brims together when no others were near to observe them. It was that which sent them off

riding by themselves—to town, they said before they started—early on the first Sunday after the wagons had pulled in to the ranch, there to stand until the beef roundup started.

They returned unobtrusively by mid-afternoon, and they looked very well satisfied with themselves, and inclined to facetiousness.

"What's the matter?" Weary asked them pointedly when they dismounted at the corral. "Come back after something you forgot?"

"Yeah—sure," Cal returned, with a flicker of eyelids. "Nothing doing in that imitation of a town, anyway."

"Where's the mail?" Pink demanded expectantly.

"We—plumb forgot that there mail, by cripes!" Big Medicine looked up quickly. "Irish was goin' to git it, but he didn't."

Pink said nothing, but he studied the four covertly.

"Sorry, Little One—honest to grand-ma, I am!" Big Medicine clapped him patronizingly on the shoulder as he passed him.

"I don't know as it matters," said Pink sweetly. "Some of us were just about ready to hit the trail. We can get it, I guess. Say! Ain't you got that cayuse caught up yet, Mig?" he called out to the Native Son, who was reclining luxuriously against a new stack of sweet-smelling bluejoint hay. "Come out of your trance, or we'll go off and leave you!"

"Oh—yuh going to town?" Cal looked over his shoulder with some uneasiness in his baby-blue eyes.

"Maybe we are and maybe we ain't. Maybe we're going to see our best girls. What's it to you?" Pink turned his back on Cal and looked full at Weary. "Come on—the girls will be plumb wild if we

don't get a move on," he said carelessly, and picked up his bridle. "Where's Andy? I thought he said he wanted to go along. Hurry up, Mig, if you're going."

Nobody knew what he was driving at, but the three were mounted well within ten minutes, and flinging back remarks to the four who had lately returned. The departing ones were well up on the hogback before any one of them ventured to question Pink, who rode with the air of one whose destination is fixed, and whose desire outstrips his body in the journey.

"Say, Cadwolloper, where are we headed for?" Weary inquired then resignedly. "And what's the rush?"

Pink glanced down the hill toward the stable and corrals, decided that they were being observed with something very like suspicion, and faced to the front again. "We're going to head for Rogers's," he dimpled, "but we ain't going to get there. Yuh needn't look down there—but Irish and Cal are saddling up again. They're afraid we're going to town. They're going to trail us up and find out for sure."

"They sure did act like they'd been holding up a train, when they rode up," Weary observed. "I've been searching my soul with a spyglass trying to find the answer for all that guilt on their faces."

"Happy Jack has been mentioning stuffed olives and moonlight pretty often today," the Native Son remarked with apparent irrelevance. "I thought he'd pickled that josh, but he's working things up again. Two and two make four—that four." With the slightest of head tilts he indicated those below, and flashed his even, white teeth in a smile. "Do you want me to guess where you're going, Pink?"

"I wish you fellows would guess how we're going to ditch them two pirates, first," Pink retorted, glancing down again at the stable without turning his head. "If we strike straight for Rogers's, maybe they'll turn back, though. They'll think we've gone over there to see the girls."

"If I knew the country a little better—" began the Native Son, and stopped with that.

"If they don't follow us over the ridge," spoke up Andy, who had been thinking deeply, "we can go up Antelope Coulee instead of down, and follow along in the edge of the breaks to the head of One Man, and down that; that's where you're going, isn't it? It'll be five or six miles farther."

Pink threw up his hand impatiently. "O' course, that's what I intended to do. But if they ride over the ridge they'll know we never kept straight on to Rogers's, and then they'll know we're dodging." He urged his horse up the last steep slope, and led the way over the brow of the bluff and out of sight of the ranch below.

"And I'm sure going to find out what that bunch has been making themselves so mysterious about, the last couple o' days," he vowed grimly. "I slipped up on 'em yesterday down in the hay corral, and I heard Cal say, 'Sure, we can! There's one in that Injun grave over in Antelope Coulee.'" He stared at the others with purpling eyes. "What's in that grave, Weary? I never was right to it, myself."

"Nothing, Cadwolloper—except what is left of the old boy they tucked under that ledge. There ain't even a perfume any more. We can go by that way and see if they've been there."

With that wordless understanding common among men who have lived

long together, they left the trail and ambled slowly across the prairie in the direction of Rogers Ranch. And they had not traveled more than half a mile when Miguel, looking back very cautiously, smiled.

"Don't look," he said, and then added melodramatically, "We are followed! Hist! The pursuers are in sight. Courage, men!"

Pink risked a glance over his shoulder, and glimpsed two bobbing hat crowns just over the brow of Flying U Coulee.

"Now, wouldn't that jar yuh?" he exclaimed, just as disgustedly as if he had not all along suspected that very thing to happen.

The moving specks stopped, remained stationary for a minute or two, and then went bobbing back again. The four laughed, pressed spurred heels against their horses, and galloped over the ridge and into the lower end of Antelope Coulee. At the bottom they swung sharply to the right, instead of to the left, rode as hurriedly as the uneven ground would permit for a mile or more; crossed the trail to Dry Lake, and kept on up the coulee to its head.

At one point their quick eyes saw where several horsemen had ridden down into the coulee, dismounted, and climbed through shale rock to the lone Indian grave under a low shelf of sandstone, left there betraying imprints of high-heeled boots, returned again to where their horses had waited, and ridden on. They also rode on, toward One Man Coulee. Before them always lay the trail of shod hoofs, where the soil was not too hard to receive an imprint.

PATSY WAS STANDING in the door of the mess house beating his fat knuckles upon a tin pan for the supper call when

Andy Green and Miguel rode leisurely down the grade. The boys were straggling toward the sound, and there was the usual bustle around the washbasins and roller towels, and in the quiet air hung the enticing odor of Patsy's chicken potpie. The two hurried to the stable, unsaddled with the haste of hungry men, and reached the mess house just as the clatter of feet had subsided and the potpie was making its first round.

Cal looked up from a generous helping. "Hello, where's the rest of the bunch?" he queried.

"Oh, the girls have got them roped and tied," Andy responded carelessly. "Mig and I got cold feet, and broke back on them."

"Didn't yuh go to town?" Irish spoke as innocently as if he had not watched them well on their way from the shelter of the bluff.

Miguel deigned him one of his heavy-lidded stares. "Why should anyone go to town, when there's three pretty girls at the next ranch? Town didn't hold *you* fellows very long."

"I thought sure you'd gone after olives, by golly," blurted Slim, with his mouth half full of dumpling.

"If I'd gone after them, I'd have got them." Miguel, usually so exasperatingly calm, spoke with some feeling.

"Aw, g'wan! I betcha yuh *dassent* go." Happy Jack grinned arrogantly.

"You wouldn't bet anything but words," retorted Miguel. "Several of you fellows seem to be just that brand of sports." He gave the faint shrug which they all hated.

Big Medicine laid down his knife and fork. "Say, do yuh mind naming over them several fellers?" he inquired abruptly in his booming voice. "I don't bet words, by cripes—when I bet—"

Miguel smiled across at him blandly. "We were speaking of olives," he purred. "Happy Jack wanted to 'betcha' I daren't go after them. He didn't name the stakes, though."

"It ain't because I ain't willin' to put 'em up," glowered Happy. "I'll betcha five dollars, then—if that suits yuh any better."

Miguel laughed, which was unusual when he was arguing with any one. "Do you mean it? Do you really think that little, weak, pretty-pretty ghost story would scare a baby?" His voice taunted the lot of them.

"Don't yuh *believe* there's a ghost, by cripes?" Big Medicine bawled pug-naciously.

"No. Of course I don't believe it. Neither do you." Miguel spoke with that weary tolerance which was so hard to endure.

"I do," Cal Emmett declared flatly. "And I'm willing to bet a horse against them fancy spurs of yours that you *dassent* go tonight to One Man Coulee and bring away them bottles of stuffed olives."

"What horse?" asked Miguel, reaching for the chicken platter.

"Well—*any* darned horse I *own*!" Cal wore the open-eyed look of innocence which had helped him scare out his opponents in many a poker game. "I say tonight," he added apologetically to the others, "because it's going to be clear and lots o' moonlight; and it's Sunday. But I don't care *what* night he tries it. I'll bet he won't bring away *no olives*."

"Aren't they there?" Miguel wanted to know.

"Oh—they're there, I guess. I'll change the wordin' a little. I'll bet yuh *dassent* go to that shack, and go into it and stay long enough to freeze onto twelve bottles o' *anything*. Tonight,"

he added, "at mid—no, any old time between ten and one. And I'll bet any one o' my four cayuses against your spurs."

"It's a go. Does the rest of my riding outfit look good to any of you fellows?" Miguel glanced around the table smilingly. "Happy, for instance—"

"I got five dollars up," Happy Jack reminded. "But I'll put twenty with it against your bridle."

"That bridle's worth fifty dollars. And my saddle cost two hundred and eighty. I'll put them up, though, if anyone wants to cover the bet."

"Say, this is a shame. Honest to grandma, I'd hate to see Miggie ridin' bareback the rest o' the summer—with a rope hackamore, by cripes! Don't go 'n' take all his purty-purties away from him like, that, boys! Haw-haw-haw!" It was unwise to laugh like that with a mouthfull of chicken. Big Medicine choked and retired from the conversation and the room.

"Say, you don't reelize, by golly, what you're up ag'inst," Slim observed ponderously. "If you did—"

"Are you dead-game sports, or are you a bunch of old women?" drawled Miguel. "My outfit is up, if anyone has nerve enough to take the bets."

They wrangled more or less amicably over it, as was their habit. But when, finally, they reached the time and the point of departure, Miguel, like the plains Indians during the fever of horse-racing, was pledged to his hat and his high-heeled boots; while the Happy Family, if they lost, would have plenty of reason to repent of their rashness.

They waited an hour for Pink and Weary to return, and, when they did not appear, they rode off without them. They pitied Miguel, and told him so.

They told of haunted cabins, and of murders and dreams come true, and of disasters that were weird.

Andy Green, when half of the ten miles had been covered, roused himself from his disapproving silence and told them a fearsome tale of two miners murdered mysteriously and thrown into their own mine, and of their dog which howled up and down the mountain gulches when the moonlight lay soft upon the land. He told it quietly, so that they rode close-huddled in order to catch it all, down to the last gruesome mysterious incident of the murdered master whistling from the pit to the dog, and of the animal's whimpering obedience—long years after, when the dog's bones were bleaching through sun and storm above, and the master's bones were rotting in the darkness below.

Happy Jack glanced uneasily toward the shadowy hollows as they rode slowly across the prairies through the night silence. Slim set his jaw and rode stiffly, staring straight ahead of him as if he feared what he might see if he looked aside. Miguel was seen to shiver, though the air was soft and warm.

"Now, this Olafson—" Andy began after a silence which no one thought to break—"the boys joshed me a lot about that. But it was queer—the queerest thing I ever saw or heard. To see him sitting there in the firelight, listening—and while he listened, to hear the wind *whoo-who* around the corners and down the chimney—and the snow *swish-swish*ing against the walls like grave clothes when the ghosts walk—"

"Aw—I thought yuh said there *wasn't* any ghosts!" croaked Happy Jack uneasily.

"And then Olafson would lift his violin and draw the bow across—" Andy,

the reins dropped upon the saddle horn, held an imaginary violin cuddled under his chin, and across the phantom strings drew an imaginary bow with slow, sweeping gestures, while his voice went on with the tale, and the Happy Family watched and listened, and saw what he meant them to see.

"And then would come that lonesome *whoo-oo* of the wind—from the violin. He made me see things. He made me see the storm, like it was a white spirit creeping over the range. He made me see—"

They had reached One Man Coulee while he talked. The Happy Family stared down into the lonely place lying nakedly white under the moon, shivered, and rode slowly down the slope. Like one in a trance Andy rode in their midst, and compelled them with his voice to see the things he would have them see. Compelled them to see Olafson, the master musician, striving after the song of the north wind, and the prairie and the wolf; made them see him as he opened the door and stood there gazing wildly out, playing something weird and wonderful and supernaturally terrible.

"I don't envy Miguel his job none, by cripes," Big Medicine said, as they drew near the point beyond which the cabin would stand revealed to them, and for a wonder he spoke softly.

Andy glanced up at the yellow ball floating serenely over the blue ocean of the sky, down the white-lighted coulee, with fringes of black shadows here and there, and then at the cabin squatting deserted against the green back-ground of willows, with blank, staring window and open doorway.

"If such things can be—if the ghost of Olafson can come back, he'll come

tonight and try again to play the wind," he said solemnly.

They rode slowly around to where they faced the door, pulled up short fifty feet away from it, and stared.

"*There he is!*" Andy's voice was the whisper which carries far. "He's *come*, boys—to play the wind again!"

In the doorway where the moon shone radiantly in, stood a black-clothed figure topped by a grinning, fleshless skull. Cuddled under the horrid, bony chin of it was a violin. The right arm upraised and bent, poising the bow above the strings. The staring, empty eye sockets were lighted with a pale, phosphorescent glow.

"Well, by golly!" gulped Slim, in an undertone, and backed his horse a little involuntarily.

"Aw—" Happy Jack looked at Irish and Cal, grinned sheepishly, and was silent.

"Go on, Miggie, and git your olives," Big Medicine murmured. "Twelve bottles. We'll wait for yuh here."

Miguel slid off his horse without a word and started forward, hesitating a trifle.

In the doorway the right arm of the figure trembled and moved slowly upward pulling the bow lightly across the strings. Came a low, wailing note on open G, which swelled resonantly in the quiet air, rose a tone, clung there, and slid eerily down to silence.

Big Medicine started and stared across at Irish, and Cal Emmett, and Jack Bates, who met his look incredulously. Miguel stopped short and stood a moment in the blank silence which followed. The gaunt, black figure bulked huge in the doorway, and the fleshless mouth grinned at him sardonically.

Miguel took a step or two forward. Again that ghostly arm lifted and swept

the bow across the strings. Again the eerie tones came vibrantly, sliding up the scale, clinging, and wailing, and falling again to silence when Miguel stood still.

Big Medicine turned his horse short around, so that he faced those three—Cal, Jack Bates, and Irish.

"Say!—the—the thing's *playin'*, by cripes!" he muttered accusingly, and edged off fearfully.

"Aw—say!" Happy Jack moved farther away in sudden, unashamed terror. "What makes it—*play*?"

Miguel stood longer that time, and the silence rasped the nerves of those who waited farther off. When he moved forward again the playing began. When he stopped, the ghostly arm was still.

Happy Jack, with a sudden inarticulate squawk, kicked his horse in the ribs and fled down the coulee. Slim went after him, galloping, elbows flapping wildly. Those who waited longer saw Miguel walk slowly up to the very threshold, and face the ghost that played over and over that one, awful strain. They saw him stop as if to gather together his courage, put down his head as if he were battling a blizzard, and edge past the unearthly figure.

As he disappeared within, brushing swiftly past the ghost, the strings twanged ominously. Came an unearthly screech which was like demons howling, or the gray wolf before a storm. It raised the hair on the scalp, and it sent Big Medicine, Cal, Jack Bates and Irish clattering down the coulee in the wake of Slim and Happy Jack.

Andy Green held his horse and Miguel's back from following, and watched them out of sight before he rode closer to the awful thing which guarded the door.

"All right, boys—yuh may as well stop the concert; the audience is half-way home by this time," he called out, chuckling as he dismounted and went clanking up to the doorway. "Say, by gravvy, yuh done fine! That last screech was sure a pippin—it like to have stam-peded me."

Pink disentangled his fingers from a fine bit of string and grunted. "It ought to be. We've been practicing that howl, off and on, for four hours. How was the fiddling, Andy?"

"Outa sight. Say, yuh better take them strings off the bow, and make darned sure you ain't leaving any tracks, or anything. Let 'em come back and find everything just the way they fixed the plant—and then let 'em put in their spare time figuring the thing out, if they can. They'll likely come moseying back up here, pretty soon—all but Happy and Slim—so you want to hurry. If you two can beat us home, they'll never get wise in a thousand years o' hard thinking."

He looked the ghost over critically, gave a snort, and painstakingly straightened the bow. "Darned grave robbers," he exclaimed, looking at the skull. "Well, hike, boys; I hear 'em coming. Got the olives all right, Miguel? Come and get on your horse. We'll meet 'em down the trail a ways if we can."

"And say," he called over his shoulder, when he was beside his horse again, "you fellows do some *going*! If you ain't in bed when we get there, the stuff's off."

Even while he looked back, Pink and Weary dodged out and vanished in the gloom of the willows.

The Native Son, bearing in a gunny sack twelve bottles of stuffed olives and on his swarthy face an unstudied grin of elation, was just making ready to

mount when Irish and Big Medicine became recognizable in the moonlight below.

"We thought we'd come back and see if you were alive, anyway," Irish announced shamefacedly, with a glance toward the cabin and the spectral figure in the doorway. "What did it do to yuh, Mig?"

"Nothing, only caterwaul like the devil all the time I was getting the olives. It's shut up since I came out of the cabin. Seems like it hates visitors."

"Er—did it—did the ghost make all that noise, honest?" Big Medicine's voice had lost some of its blatant assurance. He was bewildered, and he showed it.

"You heard him sawing on that fiddle, didn't you? The screeching seemed to come from—just all over the room." Miguel waves his free hand vaguely. "Just all over at once. Kinda got my goat, for a minute or two."

The group rode slowly away, and when Miguel was through speaking they went in silence. Halfway up the hill, Irish turned in the saddle and stared down at the roof of the little cabin showing black under the moon.

"Well—I'll—be—darned!" he stated slowly and emphatically, and rode on with the others, who seemed to be thinking deeply.

Their meditations must have been to some purpose, for, after a hasty word or two snatched in private with his fellow conspirators, Irish set the pace.

At the stable he did not wait to unsaddle. Instead he went hurriedly inside, lighted a match, and held it up while he surveyed the wall where the Happy Family were wont to hang their saddles—when they hung them anywhere. Two familiar saddles dangled there, each hanging upon its accustomed peg by its accustomed right stirrup, proclaiming silently and unanswerably the fact of their owners' presence upon the ranch.

When the match flickered and went out, Irish discovered that Cal, Jack Bates, Big Medicine, and Happy Jack were standing behind him, staring also.

"Well—I'll—be—darned!" said Irish again softly, and dropped the stub with a gesture of keen disappointment.

"It wasn't them, then," muttered Big Medicine at his shoulder. "And the—the thing—it *played*, by cripes!"



Odie Trotter literally had no voice in the affairs of his own household.
He couldn't speak above a whisper—but he had

A Name for the Town



By *ALLAN R. BOSWORTH*

LATE morning breeze woke the windmill behind Trotter's store and stage stand, and the big wheel turned on a bearing Odie Trotter hadn't greased for weeks. The result was a shrill, nagging cry that woke Odie, sprawled on a wagon box in the shade of the building.

He sat up guiltily, scratching a stubble of yellow beard. "All right, all right!" he whispered hoarsely. "I ain't deaf! Heard you the first time!"

It took him a minute to realize that it was the windmill and not his wife, Valerie. She was a head taller than Odie, and, unlike him, had a loud and competent set of vocal cords. Because of these, and not her stature, Valerie dominated the West Texas landscape there-

abouts much more than any windmill ever could.

Odie grinned sheepishly, hoping no one had seen. Mary Carruthers was coming up the road in a light ranch wagon, but she was still a safe distance away, and she smiled and waved gaily to him as she swung the team over to the loading platform at the front of the store. Odie tipped his old black hat, thinking as he always did that Mary looked very much like Valerie did when she married him, twenty years back—same pretty blue eyes and reddish brown hair, and a figure sprightly as a willow sapling. He sighed, wondering how a spell of twenty years could change a person so much.

Then he lay back down. It would be

a little while before Shorty Drew brought the semi-weekly stage down off the divide as if the red Comanches were on his tail, but before the dust could settle Valerie would be out yelling for Odie to change the mule teams. It was curious that when Odie lost his voice, years back, Valerie seemed to think he had lost his hearing, too: she always shouted at him. He resented this. He resented changing the mule teams because it was a scheduled, twice a week chore, a responsibility that pinned him down. It wasn't that he minded work, Odie told himself. Like last fall—Valerie had sent him out in a wagon to round up every man in twenty-five miles, and see that he came in to pay his poll tax and vote the Democratic ticket. And while it might literally be said that Odie had no voice in the affairs of his own household, this get-out-the-vote campaign had been very successful. Perhaps Odie's whisper had a psychological advantage—what he had to say appeared to be a shared confidence, and inspired confidence in return.

The sight of Mary Carruthers sent his thoughts back twenty years, and he could remember when he had owned a few modest, average ambitions until Valerie overshadowed them and they straggled like weeds under a live oak. Valerie had to manage everything she saw. . . .

That really was her voice, now, and even the windmill seemed to have given up. "Odie Trotter!" she called. "You, Od-iel Don't you try to make out like you don't hear me!"

"I hear you!" Odie retorted as loudly as he could. "Hell's fire and save matches, they can hear you plumb down to the Rio Grandel!"

"And don't sass me, either!" Valerie warned, coming briskly around the corner in her high-buttoned shoes. She was a tall, spare woman, and Odie sometimes thought she was still very good looking. "Odie," she said severely, "you've been whittling on the cheese again, and it looks like the rats have been gnawing it. How many times—"

"No such thing!" Odie said. "Anyway, that was yestiddy."

"Well, get up from there. The stage is coming."

"Funny I ain't heard Shorty blowin' his bugle, if it is."

"You heard me," Valerie said in exasperation. "Get up!"

He went out to the road and looked. Mary Carruthers was driving back to the ranch with a two weeks' supply of grub; Hank McIntyre was crossing the road from his blacksmith shop, and yonder came John Wesley Jones, riding in from the nearby Slaughter ranch to see if Shorty had brought any mail from the post office at Maravillas. Sure enough, the three-seated hack was already down the divide hill, its team in a slow trot that wasn't at all like Shorty's driving.

Hank and John Wesley joined Odie at the corral gate. Shorty's bugle was still mute, but they saw him, now, sitting small on the seat. Beside him was a big man who looked as if he had a ramrod in his spine.

"Never seen Sheriff Matthews ride the stage before," John Wesley drawled wonderingly. "Wonder what happened to his horse?"

The mule team turned wide for the gate, and the wheels threw up a cloud of white alkali dust. It drifted away on the wind, as thin as grass smoke, and Odie's eyes bulged as he saw young Bud Silsbee.

Bud was on the middle seat, hawkfaced

and lean and ready with the sureness of youth. He had a .30-30 saddle gun on his lap, the hammer at full cock and his hand on the trigger guard. The muzzle of the gun very impartially menaced the backs of both men in the front seat.

Odie moved nervously against the wall of the store, wanting something solid at his back. The stage stopped with that creaking and crackling of machinery cooling off; the mules shuffled and blew, and fell into a doze, and for a space the only sound was the shrill, insistent clamor of locusts in the mesquites. What Odie saw in the sheriff's face shocked him into full realization that this wasn't a joke: the big man was scared into a sweat. Odie thought, *Better not let Valerie know about this—she helped elect Matthews!*

Then Bud Silsbee spoke in a tight, dry voice. He said, "I ain't got all day, Shorty!"

"Uh—got to change teams," Shorty said, getting down as if that gun barrel were still poking his back muscles. "And give Odie this registered letter and package I got for him . . ."

"Get busy!" Bud ordered.

Odie went out and unhooked the traces, and behind him he heard the screen door slam. Valerie was already out of the store. He could feel her presence without looking around.

"Why, Bud Silsbee!" she said sharply. "Put up that gun and get down from there this minute!"

"You keep out of this, Mrs. Trotter!" Bud said uncomfortably.

"Well, my stars!" Valerie said, and looked at the sheriff. "What kind of trouble is this boy in, Mr. Matthews? Don't tell me he's done something bad!"

"Well," the sheriff squirmed as if

making a confession, "Bud has—he's killed a man. Up north of Maravillas. One of the Brennan boys. I keep telling him he ought to give up and stand trial, and not run off to Mexico. He'll get mixed up with somebody like the Keller bunch, and can't ever come back. But he won't listen to me, Mrs. Trotter."

"Listen to you, fiddlesticks!" Valerie snapped. "You're the sheriff, aren't you? Take that gun away from him and lock him up!"

Matthews flushed, and Bud laughed shortly. "He ain't man enough, Mrs. Trotter!" Bud said. "I'm long gone, and there ain't nobody to grieve for me, and I ain't coming back alive to rot in the state pen. Here's a dollar—I wish you'd go in the store and get me two cans of sardines and a box of crackers, and a can of green gage plums."

He tossed the coin through the sunlight. Valerie picked it up and looked at him, shaking her head. "If your mother had lived—" she began, then pursed her lips and went into the store. When she came back with a paper bag, the fresh team was in harness.

"Much obliged, ma'am," Bud said. "Well, Shorty, let's roll!"

Shorty reached into the seat and handed Odie a small package and a large envelope. "All the mail there was," he said, climbing up to take the reins. The stage rolled out and turned down the road toward the Rio Grande as if nothing had happened, and the group at Trotter's store watched it out of sight in silence.

"That shore beats me!" John Wesley drawled, finally. "When Bud worked for Old Man Carruthers last year, I never figured him for a gunfighter. Oh, he likes cards and fast horses, but killin' a man . . ."

"It's what comes of not having a woman in the family!" Valerie said. "A woman would have raised him differently!"

She gave Odie a sharp look, as if to make certain that he was still walking the straight and narrow. "Odie," she said, "I want you to grease that windmill—you hear?"

Hank and John Wesley went with him, and they sat for an hour in the shade of a mulberry tree on the tank dam, speculating on what had happened north of Maravillas. By that time a thunderhead rose black in the southeast, and it began raining so hard that greasing the windmill was out of the question. They took shelter on the loading platform, and it wasn't until then that Odie remembered the mail.

"Probably some more free seed from that congressman Valerie supported," he whispered, unwrapping the small parcel. "No, sir, it's a rubber stamp! Now, what would I do with this?"

"Maybe the letter says," John Wesley suggested.

Odie opened the envelope and removed a letter and a document that looked like some kind of diploma. He squinted at the letter. "Says—why, it says here that a post office is here with established at Trotter's store!" he croaked. "And this here diploma—why, hell's fire and save matches, this can't be right! You read it, Hank!"

Hank moved his lips and became audible. "' . . . all men by these presents, greeting. Umm—know ye that reposing special trust and confidence in Odie Trotter, I do hereby appoint him postmaster—'"

"What?" yelled John Wesley. "Odie?"

"That's what it says," Hank affirmed. He stepped back and looked at Odie

with respect. "Odie, this is signed by the president!"

"They—they left off the Mrs!" Odie whispered. "It's a mistake!"

Hank slapped him heartily on the back. "Odie," he said sagely, "when the president of the United States makes a mistake, it's still mighty official! You're the postmaster. Know what this means? Means there'll be a town here, some day. Trotter, Texas. Named after you!"

Odie needed something solid at his back again. He squatted down against the wall. "What'll I tell Valerie?" he faltered.

Nobody answered that, and Odie hunkered there and read through the appointment several times. Then he rose, almost decisively, and looked at his reflection in the window glass.

"Plumb forgot to shave this mornin'," he said. "Matter of fact, I ain't shaved in about a week. . . ."

The rain stopped in later afternoon, and Sheriff Matthews came limping up the road, a sodden and defeated man. Bud Silsbee had put him off the stage ten miles down, where the road followed the old Comanche Trail to Ladrone Crossing, and then had forced Shorty to drive west toward El Paso.

"Damned hotheaded young fool!" the sheriff grumbled, avoiding Valerie's eyes as he sat on the counter and emptied water from his boots. "He's holed up at Juan Mendoza's old goat camp, just across the river. That's where Blackjack Keller's outfit hides out when they ain't driving wet cattle. Bud aims to join up with Keller."

Valerie questioned him sharply. The sheriff said that Bud told a pretty straight story: he had caught Lonnie Brennan branding a calf of doubtful ownership, and Lonnie had pulled his pistol and

started shooting first and excitedly, whereupon Bud had unlimbered the saddle gun and cut him down.

"Rode out to get him," Matthews went on, "but he told the other boys at the ranch that the Brennans had so much influence they'd send him to the pen, so he was lighting a shuck for Mexico. His horse played out when I was trailing him, and mine put a foot in a prairie dog hole and piled me just when I caught up. When I come to, Bud had my gun, and we were both afoot. We went down to the road, and he stopped Shorty. You know the rest."

"Well, when are you going after him?" Valerie demanded.

The sheriff glared, and limped to the door, stamping his feet into the wet boots. He put on his hat and looked back.

"I ain't!" he said defiantly. "First place, I ain't got any authority to cross the Rio Grande. Second place, I got a wife and two kids. Bud could sit up there in the rocks and pick off twenty men coming up that hill—and what's more, he'd do it!"

He slammed the screen, and went over to the Slaughter ranch to borrow a horse. Odie slid off the counter, whistling through his teeth softly. It had been a long time since he had heard anybody talk up to Valerie like that; and when you came right down to it, a postmaster was just about as important as a sheriff. Maybe more so.

Valerie turned on him as if reading his mind. "Well, Mister Postmaster," she said. "Where's the stamp window? Where's the mail box?"

"Yep, I got a sight of work to do," Odie agreed with surprising cheerfulness. "And I better send off for some stamps next time Shorty comes through."

He got a hammer and saw from a cob-webbed tool chest, and sauntered boldly to the cheese box to nourish himself for the ordeal. Valerie was too astonished at his temerity to protest as he whittled a handful of yellow shavings and crammed them into his mouth.

"Be a town here some day!" he whispered through this, waving the knife blade in the air to describe vague municipal limits. "Town named Trotter!"

The store rang with his industry. He built a partition at the front end of the counter, and installed a window, a letter drop and a high stool. Next day Valerie noticed the patch of unfaded wallpaper in the living room, where her "What Is Home Without a Mother?" motto had mocked Odie for fifteen years. The frame was above the post-office window, with Odie's appointment in it.

"You read that all the way through?" he asked hoarsely. "Part about reposing special trust and confidence kind of makes you think."

"Kind of makes me think we sent a fool to Congress!" she retorted, but she looked twice at Odie, and was secretly pleased. He had shaved again, and wore his Sunday suit with a clean white shirt and black string tie. About him was an aroma of pomade and shoe blacking.

But nothing happened. Day after day passed without a letter or postcard in Odie's mail drop, and Shorty brought no mail. Mary Carruthers drove in daily to ask if there was anything for the Carruthers ranch, and Odie tried to tease her about expecting a new dress from the mail order house, until he saw that she didn't want to be teased. He brooded over a suspicion that all postal business was being withheld from the new establishment until

the president could rectify his mistake; he slipped into his old, unshaven ways, and resorted to the wagon box during what should have been his waking hours.

Sheriff Matthews made a futile trip to the river, waving a flag of truce and shouting over that Bud ought to surrender before the State got extradition papers on him. It was doubtful that Bud knew what these were, but he yelled back that nobody was going to serve any papers on him at all, and waved the .30-30 when Matthews tried to argue.

A week after that, Shorty came off the divide with his mules in a lope and the old cavalry trumpet at full blast. Mary and Valerie came out of the store to join the others as the stage pulled in.

"All hell's goin' to pop!" Shorty told them. "Couple of Rangers in Maravillas from Austin to extradite Bud, and Matthews is raisin' a posse. They're goin' after him tonight!"

Mary gasped, "Oh, no!" and Odie saw her face go white. Valerie said, "That's not the way to handle Bud! He's got to be reasoned with. He'll fight a posse, and they'll kill him!"

"Bud's stubborn, all right," Shorty agreed.

"Bud's stubborn? The whole younger generation's stubborn!" said Valerie. She took Mary back into the store, and the girl drove off to the ranch a little later. There hadn't been any mail. Hank and John Wesley brought a can of peaches out to the wagon box, and Odie sat with them while they ate and were carefully silent. Nobody wanted to talk about Bud Silsbee.

But before he left, John Wesley looked up with a slice of peach speared on his knife blade, and said, "What's this extradite business?"

"That means you got authority to take a man out of another country," Hank explained.

"Never heard of the Rangers bein' so legal before," John Wesley observed. "It shore sounds bad."

ALL THIS TIME the letter was lying in the box under the letter drop, waiting for the machinery of the United States mails to begin working. Odie saw it almost by accident when he went into the cubicle to carry out the pretense of balancing the day's books; he looked at it three times, and then withdrew it carefully when Valerie wasn't looking. He brought the cancellation stamp up to date, inked it, and pressed it down firmly so that the postmark of Trotter, Texas, would be plain to see. Then he read the address, and his heart jumped. It was:

*Mr. Bud Silsbee
General Delivery
Trotter, Texas,*

and in the upper left hand corner of the envelope it said "If not delivered in five days, return to Miss Mary Carruthers, Trotter, Tex."

I don't have to do anything about it! Odie told himself quickly. *If a man don't call for his mail, it ain't my fault.*

He thrust the letter into the pocket of his coat, and carefully locked the post office door behind him, while he tried to whistle nonchalantly through his teeth. All at once he remembered that white, stricken look on Mary's face, and he turned and read that line in his appointment—the one about reposing special trust and confidence in Odie Trotter. Valerie, he thought, was looking at him rather curiously.

"Uh—kind of warm this afternoon," he remarked, and went out on the loading platform. The sun was about three

nours high, and bright enough to lay a summer along the dusty road. Odie pulled his old black hat lower over his eyes and squinted down the alkali stretch.

Anybody going up that hill with a paper in his hand might as well start up with a gun! Might be all right if I could yell and tell Bud I had a letter for him, but hell's fire and save matches, this voice of mine won't carry fifty feet!

"What's the matter with you, Odie?" Valerie demanded, coming to the door. "You look kind of peaked."

"I'm all right," he said hoarsely. "Just thinkin' that's all."

He shut his eyes halfway, and looked down the road again, and he could see just how the town would be—false store fronts for maybe three or four blocks, then white paling fences with trees spilling shade over them, and kids playing in the yards. No matter what happened, they'd call the town Trotter. But it had to be an honorable name. . . .

Odie hitched up his pants and went into the corral to saddle a mule. Valerie watched him from a window, smiling to herself, and when he rode out the back gate a few minutes later, she went to the corral and hitched a span of mules to the buggy. Odie was well out of sight when she turned out on the road toward the Carruthers ranch.

All the way down ten miles of road that wound through the low hills, the locusts shrilled ahead and behind Odie, so that he traveled in a moving ambush of sound. The sun dropped, and he couldn't make the mule go faster. When he left the road and went down the white brush draw to Ladrone Crossing, it was sundown.

The Rio Grande had never looked so wide. He halted, listening to the wind

sighing in the scrub willows and hearing a killdeer's lonesome cry; and just across the curving water was a steep, rocky hill with the *sacaguista*—thatched roof of Juan Mendoza's old shack looming against the fading sky. It was here that Odie Trotter wavered, and even turned back a few steps. The moon was rising, and a posse could ride by it; a posse could surround the hill, and even a hunted man had to sleep sometime. *Maybe there ain't anything in the letter, after all. But Bud said there wasn't nobody to grieve for him, and he's wrong about that. . . .*

He stowed the letter in the crown of his hat, and urged the mule into the water. The Rio Grande spilled cold into his boots. He slid out of the saddle and let the animal tow him by holding the mule's tail. They came out with a great splashing a little way downstream, where a gravel bank gleamed white in the thickening dusk, and Bud Silsbee heard them.

"Who's there?" Bud called sharply from the top of the hill.

Odie lay on his back and held his legs up to empty his boots. He scrambled up and waved the letter. "Odie Trotter!" he wheezed, knowing that speech was futile. "It's Odie, Bud!"

"You heard me!" Bud yelled. "Either talk up, or hit the river!"

Odie left the mule and sprinted for the shelter of a boulder a few yards up the slope. A bullet chipped fragments of limestone from the rock and went singing off-key over the river, and the .30-30's crack caught up with the sound. Odie ducked again and ran for another rock, his heart pounding. This time a slug from the rifle almost cut the ground from under his feet.

"Damn you, Bud, cut it out!" he

begged. "Can't you see that it's old Odie? I ain't meanin' you no harm!"

It was too dark for Bud to recognize him on the north slope of the hill, where the shadows lay. He waved his hat above the boulder, and it jerked in his hand as a bullet tore through the crown. He dropped to his hands and knees, and crawled up behind a prickly pear, then scrambled frantically to the shelter of a ledge. Bud shot a loose rock off this, and Odie lay panting for a while. It was getting darker all the time. *maybe the posse will ride up to the river any minute, and I could get caught in a cross fire!*

He wormed his way laterally under the ledge, and then gained twenty yards upward through a clutter of big rocks. Now he could hear Bud slamming fresh cartridges into the magazine, and that showed he was close. He lifted his head cautiously, surveying the distance, and his heart sank as he saw the open ground that had to be traversed. This was as far as he could go without being shot down.

"Have to try somethin' else!" Odie whispered, and pulled a red bandana from his pocket. He put the letter on this, and then wrapped both around a sizeable stone and tied the handkerchief securely. Then he rose to his knees and threw the package with all his might.

Bud fired at him, and Odie felt the wind of the bullet on his cheek. He dropped flat again, and lay there for what seemed an eternity. There was a flicker of light at the hilltop, and another as the first match burned out, and then more waiting.

"Is that you, Odie?" Bud asked then. "Odie . . . you damned old fool, you nearly got shot! Wait a minute—I'm goin' back with you!"

The posse was planning to cross the

river after midnight, and was still at Trotter's store when the two rode up—Odie carrying the rifle, and Bud holding up his hands to make it plain he had surrendered. Hank McIntyre held up a lantern as Bud stepped off on the loading platform, and after the first shouted surprise Sheriff Matthews stood in the doorway and gaped at Odie.

"You mean *you* captured him?" he demanded. "All by yourself?"

"Had some help," Odie whispered, grinning. "Her," he added, as Mary slipped by the sheriff and threw herself into Bud's arms. "She wrote a letter tellin' him she'd marry him when he got acquitted, or when he come out of the pen. All I done was deliver the U.S. mail."

Now everybody was laughing and talking at once. "How's that?" the sheriff asked, cupping his ear. "You'll have to talk louder!"

Odie moved closer. "I said Mary wrote a letter, tellin' Bud that she'd marry him. All I done—"

He was yanked aside suddenly. It was Valerie, and she pulled him into the store and behind the counter.

"Hush up!" she whispered. "What they don't know won't make any difference, now. But Mary was too stubborn to write Bud this afternoon, so I wrote that letter myself. And you delivered it! Oh, Odie!"

It was the first time he could ever remember that Valerie had lowered her voice to a whisper when speaking to him, and the first time in a long time that she had kissed him. At the moment he was proud that she was such a managing woman.

"Hell's fire and save matches, Valerie!" he whispered back. "Don't you know everybody's lookin'?"

THE BENSON STAGE braked to a stop in front of the relay station, a long roll of dust settling behind it as Buck climbed down from the box.

"Got you some help," he told Frank Travis.

"Good. I can use a woman."

"She was in town looking for work." Buck wiped his face and neck with his bandanna. "So I told her about you and she come out."

A young woman stepped from the stage and stared at the 'dobe house, the rough-plank sheds, the split-pole corrals. She was slim and dark in a plain calico dress and sunbonnet, about twenty-five, Frank guessed, a bit pale and thin in the face, but with fine blue eyes that didn't shift when he looked directly into them.

He removed his hat. "I'm Frank Travis, ma'am."

"My name is Hodges. fudy Hodges." She had a tired attractiveness, and her smile seemed forced. "Mr Daniels told me you needed help, so I took the chance—" She was obviously embarrassed.

Frank said, "If you'll just go inside where it's cool, ma'am, I'll help Juan with the horses. Then we can talk."

Old Juan Garcia, his seamed, brown face hidden beneath his big sombrero, was already unhitching. He worked slowly and steadily, murmuring softly in Spanish to the sweat-streaked horses.

"Will the young woman stay with us?" he asked.

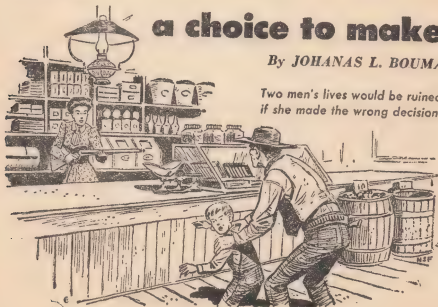
"Maybe," said Frank.

"Thank the good God." Old Juan bobbed his head solemnly. "You have need for a woman since the other one died."

a choice to make

By JOHANAS L. BOUMA

Two men's lives would be ruined if she made the wrong decision.



"She's looking for work—" Frank was tall and lean and sunbaked, and his teeth flashed white—"she's not looking for a husband."

"But you should be looking for a woman," old Juan said, and led the horses away.

Frank pumped a bucket of water at the well, washed his hands and face, and entered the big cool dining-room. Judy Hodges stood up at once. She had freshened up and had brushed away the dust of travel.

Maria Garcia, a graying woman of vast proportions, rolled in from the kitchen to serve Buck, who was bouncing Glennie on his knee, chuckling as the boy laughed gleefully.

"What I need is all-round help, so to speak," Frank said. "I reckon the best thing is to show you, ma'am, and then you can make up your mind."

The house was big and airy, plainly and sparingly furnished, with a half-dozen rooms for overnight guests. "Don't have many these days, though," Frank said. "Not since the train put through Benson. But we got a noon and evening stage that stop by, and there's times when folks spend the night."

He showed her the small store. "Trinkets for traveling folks, and a few canned groceries and staples for the ranchers and miners roundabout. Saves 'em a trip to town. Maria does the cooking, but you'd have to help with the serving and making beds. Then there's the washing and housecleaning. I like the place kept clean. Sounds like a lot, but we all pitch in and help."

"Is this your little boy?"

Frank saw Glennie at his knee, and he smiled. "Yes, ma'am. He's three." He tousled the boy's sunburned hair. "You know who this is, Glennie?"

The boy looked shyly at the woman, then at his father. He said hesitantly, "Is it Mommy?"

"No, boy, it's Miss Hodges," Frank said, flushing slightly. To the woman he said, "His mother died two years ago, and I reckon he's plumb forgotten what she looked like."

Judy Hodges smiled at the boy. "I imagine so—" She started back. "My goodness, what's that?"

Frank grinned at the catlike animal that was busy sniffing the hem of her dress. "That's a bassarisk, a ringtailed cat. I caught and tamed him for Glennie to play with. Go on, pet him, he won't hurt you."

Judy reached down tentatively to stroke the animal, saying softly, "What a lovely long tail, and all ringed with stripes."

"He's Fox," the boy said. "I call him Fox."

Frank said, "I hope you'll consider, ma'am—" She rose, and he added quickly, "Ain't much doing out here, but I can drive you into town whenever you feel the need for outside company. I go in once or twice a month for supplies, anyhow. And I pay good—"

"I'm sure I'll like it here," she smiled. "Should I start today? My luggage is still in town."

"Today's fine," Frank said, not wanting her changing her mind now that she had made it up. "Buck can bring your bags out tomorrow. Or I can pick them up this evening, if you'd like."

She fingered her dress. "I can do in this till tomorrow."

Frank looked at his son, who was watching the woman with big eyes, and thought he should ask her a little more about herself. "Are you new in these parts, Miss Hodges?"

"I'm originally from St. Louis. Then

I came west, and I've been working at Yuma, but—"

She broke off, and he said, "Hot place, Yuma."

"I saved enough to come this far—" She hesitated again, then added quickly, "I'd best tell you now, I'm only staying four months. I'll be going back home in September."

"Well, that's all right," Frank said. "We'll be glad to have you here till then."

He wondered about her the rest of the day, then figured she was most likely earning a stake. With four months' wages in her purse, she would have more than enough to get to St. Louis.

MARIA WAS GRATEFUL TO FRANK for hiring Judy. "She is a good girl and she likes her room," the Mexican woman said that evening. "And already she is helping me in the kitchen."

"That's what she's here for," Frank said.

"For nothing else?" She dug Frank slyly in the ribs with a fleshy elbow. "For nothing else, Señor Travis? Maybe to make a little sister for the boy?"

"You're sure 'nough a bad woman."

"It is good for a woman to show a little badness at times," said Maria. "It should make a man's heart beat faster."

There was no badness in Judy that Frank could see, but he had to admit there were times when she made his heart beat faster. For a hunger was in him, and it wasn't easy to keep his place. She cheered up from the day she arrived, and it wasn't long before she had taken her place in the household.

"But she has the deep sadness," Maria said. "Here—" touching her breast—"in her heart. It is the sadness that comes because of a man."

"You're talking nonsense."

"I talk, yes. I talk what you call horse sense in your English."

So Frank looked for the sadness, and when he found it he had to admit that Maria was right. It was an elusive thing, this sadness, but he would sense it sometimes when he caught Judy staring into space. Then it was as if he could almost touch her mood, and move with her along its path. And one evening after the stage had come and gone he tried to break through to her.

He found her seated on the bench beneath the cottonwoods, her eyes fixed where the sun had gone down a half hour before. She had been mending one of his shirts, but now her needle was idle.

"Nice evening," he murmured. "Makes a man feel the urge to travel."

"Or to sit quietly," she said, and then her fingers were busy again.

"Not much light for sewing," Frank hunkered down beside the bench. "But I thank you. Maria's clumsy with a needle, and sewing rips was my chore."

There was a little silence. Then she said, "You've been gone three days."

"Toward where you were looking," he grinned. "I been buying up remnants the last two-three years, building a herd, and there's good grass in the Catalinas." He drew a figure in the dust with his forefinger. "That's my brand."

"You have your land?"

"I filed. Built me a cabin of sorts, good enough for what time I spend up there. Figure on putting up a house before long, though. Sell out here. Staging's about done for except to the mining camps and a few scattered settlements, and a man has to think ahead."

"A woman, too," she murmured.

Frank looked at her. She was right pretty now that she'd taken on a little

weight and had gotten some color in her cheeks. He cleared his throat. He didn't want to rush things, but this seemed a good time to speak.

"There's a church social in Benson Sunday. Picnic. I'd like you to go. Give you a chance to meet folks."

She was silent for so long a time that his mind fumbled for further words. Then she said, "I'd like that. Can we take Glennie?"

"Wouldn't miss taking him." He paused. "You like him, don't you?"

"He's a sweet boy."

"I worry about him. He gets lonely. Times I've thought he'd be better off if I board him out in town."

She stared at him. "Oh, no, you mustn't do that! He's already lost his mother. Don't let him lose you."

"Why, now, I'd see him."

"But you'd lose him just the same. It's so hard for a boy to grow up right when he has no mother and father. It makes him different—it changes him."

"Glennie's like his mother was, quiet and thoughtful. Don't reckon anything could change him."

"You don't know, you don't know," she said, and rose, an unhappy expression on her face.

Fox ran from the house, Glennie at his tail, and Judy smiled suddenly. "There he is now. I promised to put him to bed."

THE PICNIC was a huge success as far as Frank was concerned. He didn't even mind the knowing glances and whispers of his friends. And yet a little shadow of reserve clung to Judy as if to keep all at a distance, even Frank. If he could only break through to what was on her mind, he would ask to marry her, he thought.

Then on the drive home through the

early darkness, with Glennie asleep in the bed of the buckboard, he did just that. Or he started to. But she stopped him right away, as if aware of what he meant to say.

He stopped the team and turned to her. "No, Judy, I've got to speak now or never. You're leaving next month, and that's time enough to think it over. It's hard to say, but what I felt for Ann is yours now. That's the way it is, and I can't help it. I'm asking you to marry me."

She lowered her head, and scarcely knowing that he did so he cupped her face and pressed his hungry mouth against hers. For a sweet and heady moment her lips clung to his, and then her face was against his coat, and she was shaking her head blindly.

"I was afraid of this. Stop it, Frank, stop it!"

"Why, all right—"

"I'm sorry, Frank."

He drove on. Finally, looking straight ahead, he said softly, "There's another man?"

"Yes—" She added in a dull voice, "But not the way you think."

That was all she would say. Frank couldn't wring another word out of her. When they got home she picked Glennie up in her arms and took him to his room. Then she went to her room without speaking to Frank.

Well, I sure fixed it, he thought dismally. What was it that bothered her? What was it she wouldn't put into words? Frank went to bed thinking, I'll find out or bust trying.

FRANK DROVE INTO TOWN the following Saturday, and Judy went with him. They left early, ahead of the sun. When it rose, gray became yellow, and the Santa Catalina range resembled a

wedge of crumpled copper. Judy beamed.

"It's beautiful," she breathed. "Look at the cactus flowers!"

"Wonderful country," Frank said. "I'd like to have taken you into the hills come fall. Eastern folks think this part of the country is all sand and rock. They never been up in our mountains, is all."

"Maybe you can show me before I leave."

He glanced at her, but she was looking off to the side. "That'd be fine."

He had his drink in the saloon and then went to buy his supplies. Looking over some new harness, he happened to glance through the window and saw Judy cross the street from McMann's dress shop to the post office. She was either sending or receiving mail, maybe both, and he was curious. Still it was her business. He'd had his say, and now it was up to her.

A few days after that, Frank was shoeing a balky black when old Juan came running into the smithy to say that two hombres were in the store, and Judy was having trouble with them. Frank went out of there like a shot.

If she was flustered, she didn't show it, but she did look a little relieved when Frank came in. He eyed the two men. Hardcases, he thought at once. One had opened a can of peaches with a new hatchet and was sitting on the counter fingering the slices into his mouth. He was short and wiry in tight jeans, young, and his pale skin was covered with big freckle splotches. His legs dangled and his spurs absently raked the polished side of the counter.

The other man fingered trinkets while taking short snorts from a bottle of whisky. He was tall and thin, older

than his partner. Both men had guns strapped low on their thighs.

"I'll take over," Frank said curtly, and he waited until Judy had gone. The men regarded him in a dreamy sort of way. Frank walked up to the freckled man.

"Get the hell off my counter. I spent too many hours varnishing and polishing for you to be scratching it up."

The freckled man didn't move. Frank was about to jerk him down when from the corner of his eye he saw the older man make a gesture. The freckled man shrugged and slid down, spurs raking.

From the doorway, Judy said, "They owe for the peaches and the whisky, Frank."

Frank gave her a look and she went away. He glanced from the scratched counter to the freckled man with disgust, wiped juice from the hatchet with a cloth and put it back in the rack.

He said curtly, "Anything else?"

The men smiled slowly at each other, and then the tall man said, "You trying to rush us, Jack?"

Frank stared at him for a second. "Take your time."

They did, and he was glad to see them go, riding toward town on a couple of trail-worn horses. Saddle bums, from the looks of them. Judy came in, and he turned to her.

"Know those fellows?"

She slowly shook her head. "I never saw them before in my life."

"Juan said they were bothering you."

"Well, not exactly. They were kind of talking about me to each other. It was embarrassing."

"If they come back, just keep away from 'em."

She nodded absently, staring after the men as if she hadn't heard him, a

pinched look around her mouth and eyes.

She didn't know them, though. Still she was puzzled about them, and worried. He couldn't make heads or tails of it, and he left her to finish shoeing the black.

THEN CAME SEPTEMBER, and she didn't mention leaving. But two days before the end of the month she told him, "I'm going back home tomorrow, Frank."

A hollow opened inside him. "I was beginning to hope you'd changed your mind."

Something in her face told him she'd been hoping the same thing, but she shook her head. "I'm sorry, Frank."

"Well, then, I'll take you in the buckboard," he said heavily. "The train leaves at two. We'll make it with time to spare."

She nodded; then she said, "I promised Glennie a picnic supper under the cottonwoods this evening. I'll miss him."

"You don't have to miss him."

"It's no use," she said dully, and walked away.

She didn't like leaving Glennie any more than he liked having her leave. Even Fox received a hug as the ring-tailed cat burrowed in her lap. Frank went out to help old Juan harness the team, and Maria followed him outside.

"You one big fool!" she said angrily. "Why you let her go?"

"Expect me to rope and tie her?"

"She wants to stay. Part of her heart is here."

"I don't want part," Frank said shortly, and left Maria muttering behind him.

They rode to town in silence. Frank cramped a wheel in front of the bank for she'd asked him to save her wages.

When they came outside, she offered her hand.

"I don't know how to say this, but these past four months have been the happiest in my life."

"Judy, is it me?"

"Oh, Frank, no, don't ever think that. It's—I have an obligation to keep."

His smile was thin. "Well, I could carry you off like that feller in the book you've been reading to Glennie." He shook his head slowly. "But I can't beg you to stay, Judy. It'll have to be because you want to come and live with us."

"I can't."

"Well, then, I'll say good-by."

He touched his hat and walked quickly away, his face oddly set. There was nothing more he could do. She should know that she'd only had to speak her troubled mind for him to help her. But she'd chosen to keep silent, and a man didn't pry when he wasn't asked.

He looked back once and saw her turning the corner toward the station. She had an hour-long wait, and he thought dismally that he could at least have offered to buy her noon meal at the hotel. Now it would be unseemly to go running after her.

He turned into the mercantile and ordered his supplies. McAllister, the deputy, and Williams, from the stage office, came in the back door as he waited impatiently for the clerk to fill his order. Williams carried a bulky gunny sack over his shoulder, and he asked a favor.

"What kind of favor?" said Frank.

"Pay roll for the mines." Williams put the sack down. "Like you to take it to your place as part of your supplies."

"Two ex-cons drifted into town a couple weeks ago," McAllister put in.

"They been hanging around. Figure they got their eye on the pay roll."

"I'll take it with me," Frank said.

"Buck'll pick it up tomorrow noon when he makes his run to the mining camp," Williams said. "May be just a big wind, but better safe than sorry." He looked past Frank's shoulder, suddenly alert. "There they go now!"

Frank saw them through the window on the board walk. "They were in my place not long ago. Who are they?"

"The young one is Jed Richard. They call him 'Buckskin' on account of his freckles. The other gent is Dean Downs. They both served time at Yuma. Got out a month or so ago."

The clerk was loading the buckboard, and Frank went out and put the sack containing the pay roll in with the supplies. And he was thinking that Judy had worked at Yuma. But that didn't prove anything.

Back at the station, he put the pay roll back on the high closet shelf in his room. Then he checked his six-gun, that he hadn't used in months, and slid it back in its holster and hung it back on the peg. He broke the sawed-off shot-gun he kept under the bar in the big dining-room, making sure it was loaded. There was no use taking chances.

He was outside when the stage rolled up that evening. Buck climbed down and said, "They had an eye on us when we loaded, and they sure looked mad when I kicked off without the pay-roll box." Then Buck cleared his throat, and he gave Frank a hesitant look. "You know the woman you got working here?"

"She quit. What about her?"

"She met a man on the two-o'clock. Richards and Downs was there. They all went off together to the hotel."

A sick feeling went through Frank.

"Who was he?"

"Feller named Ben Hodges. McAllister questioned the conductor. Got on at Yuma. Probably another ex-con friend of theirs."

"Did she take the train out?"

"Didn't none of 'em take the train."

Frank ate his supper long after the stage was gone. And the thought that Judy was still in town pulled at him. He knew suddenly that he had to see her. He told himself that if she was mixed up with crooks it was because they were forcing her, for there was no badness in Judy.

As he rose he heard a horse running, and then the sound of a shot. Old Juan, half asleep in the corner, gave a startled grunt, and Maria waddled in from the kitchen. Then Frank was out the door, and he recognized Judy on the galloping horse.

She half fell, half flung herself from the saddle, and she gasped, "Frank, they're coming—"

Three riders pounded up behind her and drew up before he could get her inside. They slid down as one man. Dean Downs motioned them through the door with his gun: "Up against the wall."

The third man would be Ben Hodges. Frank saw a bony youth of about twenty-two, with wild eyes in a reckless face. He felt Judy's hand grip his wrist as Buckskin came forward, that dreamy smile on his lips.

Frank saw it coming, but he ducked too late. The barrel of the gun made solid impact against his temple, and his knees jarred the floor. Through the haze he heard Buckskin say, "Tell me to get the hell off your counter, will ya?"

Frank made it to his feet and had a glimpse of Buckskin's twisted face. Then

the gun barrel knocked him down again. He got painfully to his knees, blood dripping on the board floor; he raised his head and lunged at Buckskin's legs, gripped them and jerked hard. He heard laughter, and then his head exploded, and a ragged groan escaped his clenched teeth.

Downs said, "That's enough." He waited until Frank sat up. "Where's the money?"

"What money?"

Buckskin took a step toward him, and then Judy cried, "Don't hit him again! Frank, they know the money is here. They went to the stage agent's house and made him tell."

Frank stood on shaky legs. There wasn't a chance to reach the bar for his shotgun. He said thickly, "You want me to give 'em the money so you can run off with them. You and your husband."

"Frank, he's my brother! That's why I couldn't stay here. He was in the prison at Yuma. I wanted to take him back to St. Louis, but these men were waiting for him. They were in prison together—"

"Damn it, Judy, shut up!" Ben Hodges flushed with embarrassed rage. "Don't be telling all that junk! I told you I can take care of myself!"

"And end up in jail—"

"That's my lookout, not yours! I wrote I didn't want to see you again, and for you not to meet me. But you had to go and stick your nose where it wasn't wanted."

Judy stared at him. An odd dignity settled in her eyes. She said in a low voice, "All right, Ben, I guess I learned my lesson. All my life—ever since we were kids—"

She shook her head impatiently. "Frank, they talked it over at the hotel

after they learned the money didn't go by stage. Downs said the agent would know, so he and this other man went there. I don't know what they did to him—maybe they killed him, but first he told them the pay roll was here. Give it to them, Frank. It's not worth more trouble."

"They can go to hell."

Buckskin smiled lazily, and Frank waited. Then Buckskin yelped as something streaked between his legs. "A stinking ringtail!" He fired two snap shots, and Fox jerked and lay still.

Glennie appeared in the doorway, his hair tousled, looking smaller than ever in his cotton nightgown. He looked at Fox, at Frank's bloody face, and his chin started to tremble. Then he opened his mouth and began to wail.

Judy cried, "Oh, Glennie—" and the small boy ran sobbing into her arms.

Downs grinned. He said softly, "Grab him, Buckskin."

Frank threw himself at the small man, but Buckskin half turned, his whole body behind the blow that sounded like hammer on wood. Somehow, Frank kept his feet under him. He swayed like a drunken man, half conscious that Buckskin was wrestling Glennie from Judy's arms. Then Buckskin put a boot against her and shoved hard, at the same time jerking at Glennie's arm. Judy lost her balance and fell against the end of the bar, where she lay staring at everyone as if she had never seen them before.

Ben Hodges turned on Buckskin. "No need to get rough with her!"

"Go to hell."

"Enough of that," Downs said curtly. He looked at Frank. "All right, Jack, you got just one minute to tell where the pay roll is hid. Either talk or we take the kid with us."

Glennie was kicking at Buckskin with his bare feet, screaming as if ten thousand demons had him cornered. And then a voice cut through his screams. It was Judy's.

"Take your hands off the boy!" She had the shotgun resting on the bar, and it was pointing straight at Downs. She was pale and shaken with the fury of her anger, and the hammers clicked loudly as she thumbed them back. "Right now!"

Downs looked at her for a moment, standing still as stone. Then he slowly moistened his lips, and when he spoke his voice came softly. "She means it. Let him go, Buckskin."

Glennie ran sobbing to his father, and Frank tousled the boy's hair. He said quietly. "Go to your room, boy. I'll be with you in a minute." Then: "Get my gun, Juan."

As old Juan started to leave the room, Buckskin whirled on Judy. Ben yelled, "Watch it!" and the roar of his gun reverberated in the room. Buckskin cried out and clutched a shattered arm, his eyes venomous.

Frank quickly disarmed Downs, who glared at Ben. "Jumping the fence?"

Ben was shaken, but anger edged his voice. "He was gonna shoot my sister."

Judy said, "What now, Ben?" and she searched his face.

"I don't know yet—it all happened too fast. But I feel good. Yeah, I feel good."

Frank went to the door. "Someone's coming—"

Hoofs pounded toward the station. McAllister and half-dozen men tramped inside. Frank told what had happened, and the deputy said:

"We'd have been here sooner, only we didn't know anything was wrong.

They beat Williams up bad, and he was out a couple hours before he woke up and come in. They'll do another stretch for attempted robbery."

"I'm not signing a complaint against Ben Hodges. If it hadn't been for him, Judy'd be dead."

McAllister scratched his neck thoughtfully. "Bring him into town in the morning. These other two we'll take in tonight in one of your wagons. All right, boys, let's go."

Ben Hodges looked dazedly at Frank, then at his sister. "I feel good," he said again. "I got to think about it," and he nodded to himself.

Frank said, "The chance is yours, and so's the choice. I can use a man to watch my herd in the Catalinas. There'll be fence to put up and land to seed for winter graze. And in a month or two old Juan'll need help making 'dobe bricks for the house I plan to build." He paused. "Make up your mind."

Judy said, "Ben, please—"

"Let him alone!" Frank said.

Ben almost smiled at Frank. "It's gonna be all right. We'll see what happens tomorrow. I spent five years in chains, and it might be I'll want to roam a spell. But it'll be all right." He smiled at them fully now and turned to the door. "I think I'll walk around a little."

Judy breathed softly. "Frank, he's free. I took care of him all my life, but he didn't want that. I kept thinking it was all his fault, but part of the fault was mine."

"What he did tonight came out of himself," Frank said. "It makes a difference. You made a choice yourself—" he said, and drew her against him.

"I feel free, too," she murmured; "oh, so free. . . ."

Behind the veneer of Henry Plummer's perfect manners rode a bandit king who made such men as Jesse James seem like small fry!

OUTLAW SHERIFF

*By T. J. KERTTULA
and D. L. McDONALD*



JUDGE ROY BEAN might have been "the law west of the Pecos", as he often claimed, but he wasn't in the same league with the handsome sheriff, Henry Plummer. Plummer was all the law in Montana Territory, and the leader of its biggest outlaw band as well.

Tall, effeminate, curly-haired, Plummer had deceptively mild blue eyes and charming manners. Both above and below "the Line," the ladies loved him! On this one point they all agreed: Henry was a Perfect Gentleman. In fact, he was seldom referred to by any other handle even by his own cutthroat band. The little Iowa schoolmarm, Electa Bryan, who married him in '63 and lived with him a brief and disillusioning ten weeks before departing for her home in Cedar Rapids might have had another term for him, but if so it is not a matter of record.

Behind the thin veneer of Plummer's perfect manners rode a bandit king who made such men as Jesse James seem small fry. No one knows how big his gang, which called itself "the Innocents," really was, but at least fifty bold and ruthless men and probably twice

that many quasi-respectable hangers-on were members. They had their secret signs and password, an espionage system unequaled in modern times, even "corresponding secretaries" in the towns of Bannack and Virginia City to keep the members fully informed as to prospective victims. At the last, they confessed to a hundred and two murders, but considering the number of men who left the diggin's with well-filled pokes and were heard of no more, they probably accounted for almost twice that number.

To some extent, Plummer became their leader through the sheer force of his guns, for he could have held his own with any gunman of that day, with the possible exception of that other Perfect Gentleman, Captain Slade of the Overland. In the last analysis, however, the prestige of a gunfighter depends less on the speed and accuracy of his weapons than on his willingness to use them. In that department, Plummer had no peer. He valued human life less than the cost of the bullet required to take it.

His early history is obscure. It is sometimes said he came from Boston;

at others, that he was an Englishman. The etiquette of the time and place, as well as a healthy respect for his trigger finger, discouraged inquiry. It is known he joined a California-bound wagon train in Wisconsin in 1852. He was then, probably, about twenty-four. From that time until 1856, when he was elected Marshal of Nevada City, California, he seems to have operated a small bakery in the town. The next year he was an unsuccessful candidate for State assemblyman.

Before his term as marshal expired he shot a man named Vedder, with whose wife he had been carrying on an affair, under circumstances so blatant that he was tried, convicted, and sent to prison for ten years. The following spring his friends persuaded Governor John B. Weller to pardon him on the somewhat inaccurate grounds that he was dying of tuberculosis.

Shortly after his return to Nevada City, he seriously wounded a man in a brothel fight, and lit out for Washoe where he spent the rest of the summer working with a gang of horsethieves and stagecoach robbers who operated out of there. The next year, for some reason, he was back in town again. This time, he killed a man. Breaking out of jail with the aid of two pistols—said to have been smuggled in to him by an enamoured lady—he repaid her by hitting the trail for Oregon Territory alone.

In the spring of 1861 he was in Washington Territory, staying only long enough to send back to the California newspapers a plausible tale of his having been lynched for the murder of two men in Walla Walla. He then proceeded, accompanied by the wife of a citizen of Walla Walla, to Lewiston, Idaho.

In Lewiston he posed as a gambler, but devoted most of his time to organizing a gang of bandits who, in 1862, commanded the routes from Lewiston to Orofino and other mining camps, and

murdered and robbed with impunity. In October of that year a pack train was held up and robbed of fourteen pounds of gold, but the five bandits were recognized and three of them captured and lynched. That night, pausing only long enough to leave one more dead man lying in the streets of Florence, Plummer and a pal, Jack Cleveland, were riding hard for the Continental Divide on a couple of borrowed horses.

Plummer's intentions were to catch the last river steamer for St. Louis at Fort Benton and to shake the dust of the lawless West forever from his heels. It is interesting to speculate on how different might have been the history of Montana Territory if he had not missed the boat.

Faced with months of Montana winter before another steamer was due, he and Cleveland decided to accept the invitation of J. A. Vail, who was superintendent of a government school for Blackfeet Indians, to spend some time at Sun Valley farm. Unfortunately, they both became enamoured of Electa Bryan, Mr. Vail's sister-in-law, and quarreled over her so constantly and bitterly that the lady begged them to go away for a while to let her make up her mind between them. Plummer, with his usual gracious manners, agreed at once. He and the somewhat reluctant Cleveland therefore departed for the new diggin's at Bannack a few days before Christmas, 1862.

Bannack, that winter, had probably the largest proportion of outlaws to the total population of any town before or since, and Plummer and Cleveland made themselves at home. There was no law in Bannack, except for an occasional Miner's Court which limited itself to settling claim disputes. It was an unusual week when one man wasn't shot down in the streets and two or three others wounded. And citizens who valued their own lives usually just let them lay! It was claimed that badmen had been

known to step out of a saloon and shoot at the first man whose looks they didn't like just to change their poker luck.

Broke when they hit town, by the end of the week they were in funds. Cleveland was jubilantly drinking himself into a quarrelsome mood in Goodrich's saloon, while Plummer was quietly immersed in a back-room poker game . . . and a man named Evans, who was known to have been carrying a large sum in gold dust, had disappeared for good while hunting for his horses just south of town.

Cleveland's drunken boasting was a constant danger to the suave ex-marshal of Nevada City, and on January 14th, 1863, Plummer interfered in an argument between Cleveland and a Californian named Jeff Perkins.

"Damn it, I'm tired of this," he shouted as he went for his gun. His first shot grazed Cleveland's clothing, but the second struck him in the stomach.

"Plummer, old pal, you won't shoot me while I'm down?" Cleveland implored.

"No, you so-and-so!" Plummer retorted. "Get up!" He thereupon dragged the injured man to his feet and pumped two more bullets into him; one striking him in the chest and glancing off a rib, and the other entering just below the right eye. Before anyone could move, Jim Reeves and George Ives, who later were to be important members of Plummer's band, drew their guns and escorted the Perfect Gentleman up the street and out of sight. So accustomed to gunplay had Bannack become that a man who was being shaved in the back of the bar-room never even flinched, nor did the barber miss a stroke.

If Plummer had intended to silence the only man in Bannack who knew his history and could betray him, he had not quite succeeded. On the floor of Goodrich's barroom, Cleveland was

still breathing. So great was the average citizen's fear of gunmen that for some time no one would go near him. Then Hank Crawford, a young man who ran the town's one butcher shop, came in. He coaxed several men into helping him carry the dying man to his own room, and sat with him until he died.

That was the beginning of the famous Plummer-Crawford feud. Though Crawford insisted that the wounded man had told him nothing, Plummer dared not believe him. To be safe, he had to assume that the dying man had taken his last opportunity for revenge by telling what he knew . . . and that was plenty to send one Henry Plummer to the gallows. From that time on, Plummer relentlessly hounded the young butcher.

A day or two after Cleveland's death, Plummer's rescuer, Jim Reeves, decided to shoot up the camp of the Bannack Indians who were camped just at the edge of town. He had purchased a squaw from the tribe, but she refused to live with him, claiming she had been mistreated, and went home to her tribe. Reeves tried to bring her back, but the Chief interfered. During the struggle, Reeves hit the old man over the head with his gun barrel. This attracted a number of braves to the scene and, heavily outnumbered, Reeves had to retreat.

Smartering under being bested by "a bunch of Injuns", and by the kidding of his companions, Reeves and a pal named Moore settled down to pot-shooting at the Indians with sawed-off shotguns from the back door of Goodrich's saloon, which was a bare fifty yards from the camp. They were soon joined by three more gunsters, and in the ensuing fracas the Chief, a lame boy, and a couple of squaws were killed outright and several wounded. Unfortunately for the five "sportsmen", a white man who had ducked out of an adjoining cabin to see what all the firing was

about also was hit, and died almost instantly.

For some reason, this irritated the citizens of Bannack beyond their usual calm acceptance of gunmen's pranks. Early next morning they held a mass meeting and decided to try the five in Miners' Court. As an afterthought, they voted to try Plummer for the murder of Cleveland at the same time.

Hank Crawford, the young butcher, was appointed sheriff of the Miner's Court. With a large posse, he set out in pursuit of Plummer, Reeves and Moore, who had vamoosed for Rattlesnake Ranch, a favorite hideout of Montana badmen. Reeves and Moore, afoot, were surrounded and captured in the brush, and the well-mounted Plummer reached the safety of the ranch only to be surprised and captured without a shot, galluses dangling, in a certain small outbuilding. The three others who had helped shoot up the Indian camp—minor characters whose identities have been forgotten—were taken in town, tried, and banished from the country.

Plummer was tried and acquitted of the murder of Cleveland on the grounds that the other had been fighting drunk and had made threats against him.

The trial of Reeves and Moore turned into a farce, and for the people of Montana, an expensive one at that. To begin with, the man who had promised to act as prosecutor suddenly announced that he had been retained by the defense. This left the people without a lawyer, there being no other man in town who was willing to consider the job, let alone handle it competently.

The outlaws based their defense on the point that enroute to California during the '49 gold rush, some of their party had been killed by this selfsame tribe of Bannack Indians! Oddly enough, the jury seemed more willing to accept this argument each time a stream of outlaws paraded through the space reserved for judge and jury, patting their

guns and remarking loudly, "I'd like to see the so-and-sos that'll hang Reeves and Charlie Moore!"

The judge, in his instructions, left it strictly up to the jury. They should find the defendants guilty or innocent . . . and fix the penalty, if any. The jury evaded the issue by bringing in no findings as to guilty or not guilty, but did decree the confiscation of their property and the banishment from Montana Territory of the two gunsters. The order was carried out, but by the next spring both men were back in town again and leading members of the Innocents.

This trial, a gross miscarriage of justice, was a very important milestone in the career of Henry Plummer. It marked the first stepping-stone in his rise to power, for, realizing that the outlaws had the town on the run and could rule it by fear alone, he set seriously about the business of organizing his gang.

The friction between Plummer and Sheriff Crawford continued to build up. Crawford made several attempts to resign his job as sheriff and go back to the comparative peace of his butcher shop, but was always argued out of it. When Crawford was authorized to sell the dead Cleveland's horse to defray his funeral expenses, Plummer claimed the horse and tried to provoke the young sheriff into gunplay over it. When that failed, on at least three occasions Plummer trailed Crawford out of town and tried to bushwhack him. Each time, a minor change in Crawford's plans saved his life.

One Sunday morning when Crawford was talking to a man in Goodrich's saloon, Plummer interrupted and tried to start a fight between the two men. When that failed, he challenged Crawford to come outside and fight. Crawford followed him outside and offered to fight with fists, but not with guns. Plummer insisted on guns, but Crawford did not need to hear the stealthy

movements going on in surrounding buildings to know that, even if by some miracle he could beat Plummer to the draw, he would be cut down by some member of Plummer's gang hiding near by.

Crawford won that round in the only possible way. Turning contemptuously on his heel, he walked slowly down the street. Plummer was wise enough to know that if Crawford died with a bullet in his back there'd be no trial by Miner's Court. Hank's friends would merely utilize a rope looped over the nearest tree, but quick!

After that, however, it was simply a question of who got in the first shot. Crawford went home for his shotgun, and Plummer did the same. All that afternoon and evening, Bannack was tense. Twice, attempts were made to shoot Crawford through a window. Early next morning, Plummer sent a pal to Crawford with the suggestion that they compromise and agree to meet in future as strangers. Crawford declined to be taken in so easily, and stayed holed up in his little butcher shop until noon.

About twelve o'clock, seeing no sign of the gang, he left his rifle in the shop and slipped across the street to get some lunch. Loitering over his coffee, he glanced out of the window and came out of his chair like a shot. Across the street, Plummer was slipping silently toward the little butcher shop, double-barreled shotgun poised for a snap shot through the window. For once, Plummer was alone. Crawford borrowed a rifle from the café owner, kicked open the door, and snapped a single shot at his enemy. It had to be a quick one, and he had time for no other. But he showed his gun-handling ability in that solitary shot with a strange rifle; he did worse than kill his enemy. He ruined Plummer's gun hand.

The shot struck the Perfect Gentleman in the right arm, entering just below the elbow, and plowed the entire length

of the forearm to lodge in the wrist. Plummer's wild and reckless gunfighting days were over. Though the arm healed surprisingly, he was never to be the fastest gunman in the mountains any more. He practiced constantly with his left hand, but he never equalled the speed and accuracy that had been his. As he nursed the wounded arm, his hatred for Hank Crawford grew to almost insane proportions.

Hank's friends mounted an almost permanent guard over him, but even so several attempts on his life were foiled only by almost unbelievable luck. The strain of being constantly on his guard began to tell on the young man. He had, he felt, no right to endanger the lives of his friends or to bring upon them the enmity of the outlaws. There was only one way he could stop them from fighting his battles, and he took it. He pulled out; went back home to visit his relatives in Wisconsin. Even though his departure was supposed to be secret, all the way to Fort Benton three members of Plummer's gang stalked him. For all the three hundred miles he rode only at night, sleeping in fitful snatches by day, without even a fire to cook a meal or warm himself. He dared not stop at ranches or stage stations for fear he might be trapped in a room from which he could not escape. But his luck held and he beat them on board a downstream steamer by less than an hour. That ended the Plummer-Crawford feud, for by the time Crawford got back to Montana Territory, conditions had changed.

That one snap shot by Hank Crawford had considerable effect on Montana history. Plummer now turned all his talents to organizing a really efficient gang. It is not recorded if the citizens of Bannack noticed that suddenly twenty-five of their most notorious gunmen and two or three times that number of lesser fry began to tie their neckties or neckerchiefs in a sailor's knot,

to shave down to just a mustache and a wisp of chin whiskers, to ride only the best horses that could be found in that part of the country, and to go armed with two sixguns, a knife, invariably a sawed-off shotgun, and usually a rifle as well. These signs, as well as the password, "Innocent", identified gang members to each other.

Despite the fact his character could have been no secret to the people of the town, Plummer was elected sheriff at a mass meeting on May 24th, 1863. It is sometimes suggested that his gang manipulated the election, but evidence indicates that this meeting was not dominated by the rough element of the town. It seems more likely that his election was due to the cynical belief of the more respectable citizens of Bannack that, under the circumstances, it was more important to fill this post with a daring ex-pistoleer than with an honest man.

In June of that year, seventy-five miles from Bannack, the fabulously rich Alder Gulch strike was made. In its first four years this produced more than forty millions in gold. Towns mushroomed up and down the gulch, the foremost of which was Virginia City with its population of ten thousand. Somehow, Plummer wormed himself into power as Sheriff of Virginia City, too. Now at his mercy lay the whole southern part of the Territory; a district as large as most eastern States. It was a mad golden empire; one that was made for looting. Plummer and his gang were glad to oblige.

As his chief deputies, Plummer appointed three of his own gang; the road agents Jack Gallagher and Buck Stinson, and Ned Ray, who kept "a house" at Bannack. Perhaps as a joke, or for the sake of appearances, he appointed one honest man, D. H. Dillingham. Unfortunately, it did not take long for Dillingham to discover that all was not as it seemed in the Sheriff's Department. He warned one Jim Dodge

that Deputy Stinson and a couple of his pals were planning to hold him up on the road to the new diggin's at Alder Gulch. Jim tipped off the robbers—the threads of who was honest and who wasn't are pretty hard to unravel in the Bannack of that day—and they trailed the honest but misguided deputy over to the new town of Virginia City, where he was idly listening to a Miner's Court ruling on claim disputes, called him aside and all three pumped bullets into him.

Following a prearranged plan, Deputy Gallagher now rushed in and arrested them, taking their guns and re-loading them to make identification more difficult.

On that day and the next, the killers were tried in a hastily-formed Miner's Court. Charlie Forbes was acquitted, but Deputy Stinson and Lyons were sentenced to hang. Men were appointed to build the gallows and dig two graves, but by the time this was done Sheriff Plummer had moved adroitly to save them. Rounding up all the dance hall girls, and any others of the female persuasion who would join in, he sent them to the place where the prisoners were being held with instructions to set up a cry for banishment instead of hanging. The girls played their part superbly, weeping and imploring, "Oh, save these poor young boys' lives!" Someone read a faked letter which Forbes was supposed to have written to his mother. The crowd was soon split into two factions, and it was decided to vote again on whether to hang or banish the prisoners. In the confusion caused by the bandits' friends as they passed through the line again and again to be counted, someone shouted, "Give them a horse and let them go!"

"They're cleared!" bawled Deputy Gallagher, pushing the two aboard an Indian pony standing near by. Before anyone could interfere, the two galloped out of sight up the gulch. Plummer had won another round and more firmly

established his hold over southern Montana Territory.

A firm hold it was. Plummer was an astute leader. While the gang's activities were open and flagrant, he realized that no one would seriously interfere with them if he could prevent the formation of any organized group that could defy them. So prominent men who might have become leaders were shadowed, harassed, and threatened. Plummer's henchmen had wormed their way into every group in town, and though the main members were known to everyone, there were dozens of supposedly honest men who secretly belonged to it. No one knew when he might be talking to someone who would report his remarks—and if his talk seemed dangerous to the gang, he would be immediately "taken care of", probably in broad daylight and in the middle of a main street. The gang carried on a voluminous correspondence in code regarding the movement of gold shipments and well-heeled miners, and delighted in letting slip the details of elaborate plans to get out of the country that had been hatched in secret by groups that were later waylaid and robbed. It served to keep the populace reminded of the efficiency of their organization, and was an effective way of preventing the unorganized miners from fighting back.

But in every matter of this kind, there is always a breaking point. For the decent element of Montana it was the murder in late November—probably no more brutal than half a hundred others of that bloody summer and fall of 1863—of an old ranch hand named Nicholas Thibalt by Plummer's chief aid, George Ives. Nine or ten days later the old Dutchman's frozen body was discovered by a freighter named William Palmer. The marks of the lariat by which he had been dragged into the brush still showed plainly on the old man's neck and wrists, and it was evident Thibalt had been alive when

dragged there for his hands still gripped a slender willow shoot, as if he had caught at it in an attempt to raise himself.

A wagon was sent out from Nevada City—the Montana one; not to be confused with Plummer's first stamping-ground—and the old Dutchman's body brought in and kept on display all day, the willow twig still clutched in his gnarled and shattered hands. That night, around ten o'clock, twenty-five grim-faced men rode out of town. At three-thirty the next morning they crossed Wisconsin creek, seven miles below the gang's hideout on Dempsey's Cottonwood ranch. The creek was frozen but the ice was not strong enough to hold both horse and rider and most of the horses broke through. The men had to dismount and emerged from the creek wet to the waist. There was no question of dry clothes or a fire; they rode on.

At dawn they surrounded the ranch and took prisoner George Ives, together with two other members of the gang, Long John and an oldtimer named Tex and five nondescript characters who may or may not have belonged. They were later turned loose, while the three gunmen and the fine span of mules that were recognized as having belonged to the dead Thibalt were headed for Nevada City.

On the way back, Ives escaped and on a fleet horse headed across the plains for the mountains above Biven's Gulch. At the gateway of the Daly ranch, another gang hideout, Ives' favorite mare stood saddled and bridled, waiting for him. But the posse cut him off, and he turned his tired pony toward the hills while one of his pursuers took the horse intended for him. It was a futile gesture; two hours later he was recaptured.

He begged to be tried in Virginia City — Plummer's stronghold — saying wistfully that he had once shot a dog in Nevada City when it nipped at his

horse, and the citizens there were against him; wouldn't give him a fair trial.

Fair or not, that is where the trial was held. From December 19th to late afternoon of the 21st the lawyers Plummer had provided tried every trick to snarl the proceedings, and the rest of the gang alternately tried to bribe the guards, threaten them, or effect a rescue. The trial was held outdoors, and in a solid ring around the outdoor courtroom stood a miner's guard with drawn weapons. Reluctantly, Long John and Tex were forced to testify against George Ives. The evidence was conclusive. In less than half an hour the jury returned a verdict of "guilty".

Fearing a rescue attempt, the court ordered Ives hanged at once. With muttered threats coming constantly from the crowd, the guards had been reinforced and now stood shoulder to shoulder in a solid wall, shotguns at the ready. The crowd fell silent as Ives mounted the box. The judge's order came loud and clear, "Men, do your duty!" Simultaneously, the guards jerked their guns to their shoulders, and in the stillness echoed the click of the hammers as they came back to full cock. Then came the crash of the overturned box, and George Ives, coldblooded killer, swung facing the pale winter moon.

The trial of Ives, like the earlier trial of Plummer himself, was an important milestone in the Perfect Gentleman's career. It marked the beginning of the end of his power. Even though, for another week or two, robberies continued as in the past and, if anything, murder was committed more openly than before. The road-agents knew, as did the miners, that if as much time and energy were to be expended on each member of the gang as on George Ives, it would be virtually impossible to wipe them out.

Then, about a week after the hanging of Ives, an unusual thing happened in

Virginia City; a man there died a natural death. He was a former member of the Masonic Lodge and the call went out for all former Masons to attend his funeral. When they saw how numerous they were, they decided to form a local lodge. For once, Plummer had neglected to infiltrate a meeting, and as soon as the brothers had attended to the details of the departed's obsequies they settled down to the more serious business of forming the dreaded Vigilantes of Montana.

No publicity or fanfare attended the formation of the Committee. Only the members themselves knew who rode in the band and not even the members knew all who belonged to it. No distance was too great to trail a man, and sometimes they trailed them clear into Idaho and left them where they found them, hanging from the nearest tree.

With the formation of the Vigilantes, Plummer's organization began to fall apart at the seams. So well did they keep their secret that he did not know the name of one man who rode in that grim silent band that struck so swiftly in the night and melted away before the first light of dawn. They were a rough, tough lot and relentless trailers. The bitter December weather did not deter them at all, for—almost willingly, it seemed—they rolled into their blankets in a snow drift when night fell and rose at dawn to ride again. When they got on a man's trail he could only ride on blindly and without hope until, some night, he looked into their masked faces and posed himself that byword of the Vigilantes' victims, "Shall I slide or shall I jump?"

They now held the upper hand in the war of nerves, but the Perfect Gentleman went his imperturbable way. He had always delighted in playing the perfect host and his entertainment was frequently lavish. To these banquets he deliberately invited leading business men and miners who had lost gold on the looted stages, knowing full well

that they knew who was really paying for the meal . . . and that they knew he knew. The irony of the situation seemed to tickle his vanity, and on the whole it was much healthier if, when invited to dine with Henry Plummer, you made it a point to accept.

His Christmas dinner that year was a banquet that surpassed all the rest, with a forty-pound turkey rushed in from Salt Lake City at the cost of more than a dollar a pound, and rare wines and fruits all the way from San Francisco. That night, the irony was slightly reversed, for beside the Governor and other high territorial officials there were a number of men who, as Vigilantes, had only the night before cast the black pebbles into the hat and sealed Plummer's fate. Perhaps that did not prevent them from enjoying this last meal, knowing that, for once, Plummer would pay. Whether he suspected this or not, Plummer was the perfect host that night. Though perhaps he did not realize his danger then, this would be his last chance to play the Perfect Gentleman.

With the New Year, the Vigilante sign was being chalked on the doorways of his most trusted lieutenants. The huge scrawled figures, 3-7-77 (the dimensions of a grave) meant that if nightfall found any man whose door was so marked still in town, dawn would find him swinging at the end of a rope from some convenient tree. That mark was a master stroke; Plummer's elaborate intelligence system went to pieces as men whose doors had been branded pulled out, usually without bothering to wait for breakfast or to inform the boss of their going.

On the night of January 4th, 1864, Plummer's most trusted messenger, Red Yeager, and a corresponding secretary of the gang named Brown were hanged by the Vigilantes at Laurin's ranch on the Stinkingwater (Ruby river) near the mouth of California creek. Before

he died, Yeager made a complete confession, naming all the rest of the gang members, implicating the Sheriff, and explaining the meaning of the sailor's knot in the neckerchiefs and the password, "Innocent".

Henry Plummer was in more danger than he realized. On Sunday afternoon, January 10th, he completed his plans to pull out for greener pastures. So well had the Committee kept the secret of Red Yeager's confession that apparently he did not realize his time was running out. Under cover of darkness he and his deputies, Buck Stinson and Ned Ray, had brought their fastest horses into town. They now stood, saddled and bridled, in a grove of cottonwoods just beyond the Indian camp. At the quietest time, just before dawn, the three of them would slip out of town and cross the divide into Idaho, en route to Nevada.

When, just before midnight, knuckles brushed lightly against his bedroom door Plummer, in his shirt sleeves, unsuspectingly opened it, expecting to find Ray and Stinson outside. He whirled like a cat as the door crashed inward and masked men with drawn guns surged into the room. His hand slid for his gun but it wasn't there.

"Plummer, we want you!" a muffled voice commanded.

"All right, boys. Just wait till I put on my coat." He reached for it, but the Vigilantes were faster. One grabbed the coat, removed twin revolvers from its pockets, and tossed the coat to Plummer.

As they led him out into the street, they were joined by other groups who had picked up Ray and Stinson. So quickly and silently had the plan been carried out that no onlookers had been drawn to the scene. Bannack did not know what was happening or even that the Bannack Vigilante Committee had been formed. There were only the heavily-guarded bandits, watching in horrified fascination as the masked men

went about their preparations at the foot of the gallows Plummer himself, in his role as Sheriff, had provided. The night was black and overcast, the north wind biting cold. There was no snow and the steps of the executioners resounded hollowly on the frozen ground, as they looped three ropes over the crossbeam.

"Bring up Ned Ray," someone called. Only the tightening of the noose choked off Ray's cursing. Loosely pinioned, he managed to get his fingers under the noose, prolonging his agony.

"There goes poor Ned," whined Stinson. A few moments later he too was dangling in thin air.

Then came the call, "Bring up Plummer!" Plummer fell to his knees, begged for time to settle his affairs, offered to leave the country forever, suggested that he be chained in the meanest cabin, demanded a jury trial, asked to see his sister-in-law, and even confessed to all his crimes. When all of this proved unavailing, he buried his face in his hands.

"Oh, God," he moaned, "can't you see, boys, I'm too wicked to die!"

The leader grasped him by the arm, but Plummer shook him off and implored, "Can't you give a man time to

pray?" Knowing that Plummer still hoped for a rescue, the leader replied, "Sure, but do it up there with the rope around your neck."

Plummer thereupon lost interest in his prayers. He walked calmly to the platform. "Give me a good drop, boys," he said as they fitted the rope around his neck.

The Vigilantes, always willing to oblige in such matters, lifted him high on their shoulders and dropped him. Not a man moved or spoke as they watched his dying reflexes mirror his whole life. Almost with its old speed his crippled gun hand darted to his hip, went through the motions of drawing and cocking his gun, then with one last wide sweep drew up as if to fire.

So perished the kingdom of the outlaw sheriff, as that night and in the days to follow he and most of his bloody band slid or jumped at the end of a Vigilante rope into eternity. Strangely enough, though twenty-two of the outlaws' bodies had some woman waiting to claim them for a decent burial . . . even if, sometimes, it was only a draggled drab like Ned Ray's mistress, or a stolid faithful squaw . . . no woman claimed the body of that ladies' man, the Perfect Gentleman, Sheriff Henry Plummer.



TIMBER!

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GUESS I'LL NEVER BE LIKE THEM!

WHAT ALICE SEES IN THAT GUY I JUST DON'T KNOW!

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GOSH! IT'S BOB!

ALICE! COME HERE! YOU'VE GOT YOURSELF A MAN!

BOB! YOU'RE TELLING ME!

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BEANTOWN BADMAN

by Thomas Thompson

A Loudmouth Jones
Novelette

Loudmouth starts out with a small patch of wounded pride and cultivates it into a hundred-section spread of hell-raising rage.

CHAPTER ONE

Loudmouth Says His Say

THE OUTDOORS LEAVES its mark on a man, they say—and this man looked as if the outdoors had up and tromped all over him. He stood at the bar, a man who was big without being massive, his pin-bright eyes squinting evilly out of a saddle-leather face, the quivering of his walrus mustache the only sure sign of his caged temper.

He had been drinking steadily for five days and all but his most intimate and trusted friends had long ago been thrown out of the saloon. He had started out with a small patch of wounded pride and cultivated it into a hundred-section spread of hell-raising rage.

A frightened and resigned quiet lay over the town of Seco, the very air charged with the impending explosion. A fuse was sputtering and burning here and with the arrival of the ten-o'clock train the dynamite would go off.

Only one man seemed unimpressed, and he was a young dude lawyer. He

stood close to the big man, his voice calm, sure, and he made one last and reasonable request. The big man tilted his bottle, drank deeply, and with the well-known bellow that had given him his name said one word.

"No!"

The dude lawyer took a handkerchief from his pocket, mopped his ruggedly handsome face, and said, "All right, Loudmouth. All right. I thought maybe I could talk some sense into you. I wanted you and my father to be friends."

"We will be," said Loudmouth Jones, "as long as your father stays in Boston and I stay in Texas. We both got our own pasture and we won't lock horns. You got about two hours left, Ben boy. Stop that train and send him back to Boston or else start rollin' up your pants legs. If he shows on my range the blood is gonna be knee-deep."

"Look, Loudmouth," the young lawyer said. "I think as much of you as if you were my own flesh and blood, you know that. I'm married to your daughter. I love her. But my father happens to be the baby's grandfather just as much as you're the baby's grandfather and he has a right to have his say about naming her. You start any trouble, and I'll finish it for you!"

Loudmouth Jones squinted one evil eye and took a sidelong glance at Ben Rensler, his son-in-law. Experience had taught him that this boy didn't bluff. But Loudmouth had carried this thing too far to turn back now.

He said, "I'm sorry you threatened me, boy. I was beginning to take to you. It'll hurt me to see my only daughter left with that little baby and no husband."

"And it will hurt me to see me and my wife and that little baby left with only one grandfather," said Ben Rensler. "Think it over."

"I've thought on it," said Loudmouth. He tilted the bottle and drained it, hoisted his beltless pants with the

flats of both hands, pushed his hat up in back, and spat accurately at a distant cuspidor. He had said his say. It was over.

Ben Rensler turned without another word and walked out of the saloon. His back was stiff and straight, his shoulders squared.

Loudmouth fought down a swelling desire to call the boy back. The desire crawled right up into his throat and made a hard lump that almost choked him. He took another drink to wash it down, then glared at the five men who remained in the saloon. This was his crew. They would stick with him regardless of whether he was right or wrong.

"Well, damn it?" Loudmouth roared.

The tall, lanky man who blended nicely with the post against which he was leaning shrugged his thin shoulders.

"I didn't say nothin'," he stated.

"Well, don't," Loudmouth warned. His gaze moved to a wind-burned little man whose skin would have made a fine covering for a Visalia saddle tree. "Whang?" Loudmouth asked.

The man called Whang stared straight at his boss and swallowed slowly. "I feel the same as Shiftless does," Whang said.

"You're all agin' me," Loudmouth raved. "Everybody's agin' me. Even my own daughter! I'll raise so much hell—"

An older man, a slab-handed man with front teeth that stuck out an inch over his lower lip and gave him the name of Beaver ventured an opinion. "Why don't we just take a little trip, Boss? Just the six of us. We could get a couple of barrels of whisky and just go someplace and lie to each other."

There was one youngster in the crew, an evil-looking hatchet-faced boy of forty-odd whose crossed gun belts and holstered guns always seemed to be weighting him down. He was the idealist,

and his face lighted with this possibility of relaxation.

"Sure, Boss," he said eagerly. "And when we get back this Boston banker will be gone. It don't make no difference what he wants to name that little filly granddaughter of yours. You can name her whatever you want when we get back—"

Lefty, a short pickle barrel of a man with a sour face made this a rare occasion by speaking. "Someday you'll learn, Kid."

The warning came a little late. The Kid was standing there, grinning widely, and he kept right on grinning even after Loudmouth's hammer fist hit him on the side of the head. The Kid went over backward and lay there on the floor, grinning up at the ceiling.

"When I want an opinion," said Loudmouth Jones, "I'll ask for it. And when I ask for an opinion, I don't want no back talk. Is that clear?" He gave The Kid a brief glance, sorry now that he had hit him, and he looked at the clock on the wall.

"You got ten minutes to get some fightin' whisky in yuh, he said. "We may have to take that train off the track, turn it around, and push it back to Boston."

They settled down to some serious drinking, but there wasn't much joy in it. The truth of the matter was, a thing that had started out as normal indignation had grown into a monster that was going to be hard to handle. Too many people had heard Loudmouth make his threats against Phineas Rensler; too many people had whispered around that Loudmouth was just that—a loudmouth.

In the old days they wouldn't have dared make such remarks, but Seco town was growing up and it seemed that the more it grew the smaller Loudmouth Jones became by comparison. The times were forcing Loudmouth to show his size.

A few years back it would have been

a simple thing. Willy LaRue, the rustler, was operating in those parts then, and when Loudmouth and his boys needed to let off steam they could always round up Willy LaRue. Willy was the nearest thing to a real old rawmeat Texas badman that was left in the country. But now, thanks to the legal mind of Ben Rensler, Willy was living in State Prison and would be for the next ten years or so. Loudmouth sort of missed Willy. Without Willy to chase, a man could get himself into trouble.

So here they were, trapped by wounded pride and idle time, six of the toughest men Texas had ever produced, pitted against a Boston banker none of them had ever seen. Loudmouth took a hefty drink, but it did little good. He would have given his right arm to get out of this mess he had created but damned if he was going to give anybody the satisfaction of knowing he talked too much!

He kept glancing out the window, hoping to see Ben Rensler riding by on his way to take the banker off the train at Cottonwood, ten miles up the track, knowing as well as he knew his own name that Ben would do nothing of the kind.

Damn it to hell, thought Loudmouth Jones, why did my Ellie have to marry a man who's as stubborn as I am? He heaved a big sigh.

"All right, boys," he said. "Let's go stop us a train."

"Boss," said Beaver, moving out of reach, "the last time we monkeyed with the railroad we got the worst of it."

Loudmouth's voice knocked six glasses off the back bar. "Worst of it? I made 'em pay for every acre of land of mine they took, didn't I? I made 'em move the furniture before they laid the tracks through my front room, didn't I? It's just by the grace of my good nature that the railroad runs through here at all and I ain't sure I'll let 'em stay.

I may rip up the track and move it over into the next county."

"Boss," said Shiftless, putting the post between himself and Loudmouth, "you sure you want to go through with this?"

Loudmouth focused the meanest pair of eyes God ever dished out except to a wild boar pig. "You want me to handle this alone?" he said, his voice strangely quiet.

Shiftless looked at Beaver. Whang shrugged his shoulders and Lefty hitched his gun belt. The Kid was still grinning, wandering around in a half daze.

"What's holding us up?" The Kid asked.

"That's better, boy," Loudmouth said affectionately. "Another twenty years or so, you'll make a top hand. Let's go."

A half hour later, a few miles out of town, Loudmouth Jones and his crew worked in the broiling sun. They weren't very steady on their feet and they kept getting mighty thirsty, so they had to take a nip now and then. The railroad track was a couple of shimmering ribbons of steel, lying straight and true across the open plain into the rugged rocks of Devil's Gorge.

A growing pile of rocks, sagebrush and fence rails was beginning to shape into a mound large enough to stop six trains. There wasn't any danger of wrecking the train—Loudmouth had made sure of that. The engineer could see the obstacle a mile before he reached it and the Seco train wasn't a fast one. But the train wouldn't pass this spot, that was sure. It would have to stop—and when it stopped Loudmouth was going to see to it that Phineas Rensler changed his mind about meddling in the affairs of Loudmouth's first grandchild. . . .

Sweet streamed into Loudmouth's eyes. The whisky got to churning and bubbling and memories came thick and fast.

He thought of his wife, Lola, remembering how he had loved her. He wanted the baby to be named Lola. It seemed such a small thing to ask. But Ben Rensler had sent for his father; Loudmouth's daughter Ellie had agreed that it was the thing to do.

Loudmouth had said his say and, as usual, he had said too much. And now here he was, planning to stop a train that carried United States mail—How in the hell did a man get into these things?

He was suddenly aware that his crew wasn't working. They were all standing there, staring up the track, and Loudmouth's first thought was that the train was coming. But there wasn't any sign or sound of it.

He straightened up, put his hand to the small of his back—and then he saw it. A man was walking down the track, straight toward the barrier.

He wasn't a very big man, but he walked as if somebody had glued a ramrod to his back. He took short, snappy steps; his arms were bent at the elbows and they pumped back and forth as he walked. He was dressed up like he was going to a funeral, derby hat, long frock coat, striped pants. The sun glittered off the toes of his shoes.

His face was ruddy pink, his hair snow-white. He wore full Burnside whiskers, but no mustache. He looked like a little locomotive moving under a full head of steam.

He chuffed to a stop, his arms still working like pistons, and his cold blue eyes searched the face of every man there. A sudden gleam came into his eyes. He made a small, whinnying sound, his right hand moved and came up holding the biggest pistol Loudmouth had ever seen. The hammer of the pistol came back under a very capable thumb and the little man smiled.

"Let's don't waste my time," he said covering them all with the pistol. "I'm on my way to a place called Seco. Just

walk down the track ahead of me. We'll figure up the amount of the reward due me when we get there."

CHAPTER TWO

Loudmouth Goes Too Far

TOTAL SURPRISE mingled with too much whisky made Loudmouth's crew a bit inefficient. At any other time Shiftless would have knocked the gun out of the little man's hand and tossed him out into the brush. Instead, Shiftless stood with his mouth open, his eyes bugging.

The Kid, still a little addled from the punch Loudmouth had given him, made no attempt to reach for his guns. Beaver, who had lived a long time and seen many things, just shook his head, trying hard to clear it.

Lefty ignored the entire thing, certain that the little man was just a figment of imagination that had come out of a bourbon bottle. Lefty turned his back. The figment rammed the barrel of the pistol halfway through him and Lefty's hands shot shoulder-high.

Loudmouth Jones let out a bellow that would have scared a lesser man half to death. The little man didn't bat an eye.

"Start walking," he said.

"Why, you sawed-off little cockroach!" bellowed Loudmouth Jones. "Just who the devil do you think you are?"

"A man who is tired of being trifled with," the little dude said. He held out his hand. "I'll appreciate it very much if you'll hand over my watch. It was a present from my wife Belle and has a certain sentimental value." He curled the fingers of his left hand in a wagging motion. "Come, come—the watch."

Beaver found his voice. "Watch him, Boss. He's a maniac. He's loco with the heat!"

"I believe," said the little man, "that it is characteristic of the criminal mind

to feign surprise upon capture. Now since I recognize and can positively identify each and every one of you—"

"Wait a minute," said Loudmouth, his voice taking on a silky tone. "This little jaybird has got us mixed up with somebody," Loudmouth smiled, but his eyes smoldered and sparked. "Just who do you take us to be, mister?"

"Isn't this rather silly?" the little man said, turning his gun more directly on Loudmouth. "An hour ago you wrecked the train I was on, robbed the express car, and stripped me of my valuables. The barrier you constructed across the track was exactly the same as this one—although why you are building one here I'll never know, unless you are expecting a train from the other direction. In spite of the handkerchiefs you had over your faces, I can positively identify each of you, which I shall be happy to do since I am sure the reward money offered for your nefarious hides will total a tidy sum. Now that we understand each other if you will just kindly drop your weapons and start walking—"

Loudmouth's eyes were bugging. He closed them tightly, then opened them quick. The little man with the gun was still there. It wasn't an optical illusion, then. He was almost positive the little man had said something about the train being wrecked—

Loudmouth let a slow gaze wander across the faces of his crew. He saw one of Lefty's eyes close in a slow wink. Loudmouth smiled.

"Well, now," he said to the little man, "it looks like you got us dead to rights." The Kid moved about a quarter of an inch. "Tell me," said Loudmouth, "I didn't get a chance to look around much there at the wreck. Was anybody hurt?"

"The engineer has a broken leg, I believe," the little man said. "The others of the train crew seemed to be all right. Due to my fine physical condition I escaped without a scratch."

"Well, we'll see if we can't fix that for you," said Loudmouth pleasantly.

Shiftless uncoiled like a snake. The Kid's guns came out of their holsters and rammed hard against the little man's belly. Lefty drove for the little man's legs. Whang caught the gun which Shiftless had knocked out of the little man's hand. Beaver hit the little man right on top of the derby.

The flurry of excitement sobered the boys noticeably. They stood there, staring down at the still body of the little man and The Kid wiped the perspiration off his forehead.

"What do you make of it, Loudmouth?" The Kid asked. "That talk about the train being wrecked?"

"Plain as the nose on your face," said Loudmouth Jones. "This here jasper is a whisky drummer. I can spot 'em a mile off. He rented a rig in Cottonwood fixin' to drive on to Seco. The hosses got away from him, he started to walk down the track, and the sun got to him."

"Whisky drummer, huh?" said Shiftless. He got down on his knees and searched the little man. "Nary a sample on him."

"We can't leave him here in the sun," Loudmouth said. "He might get worse."

"We better get him into town," Whang said. "Maybe Joe in at the saloon is dependin' on him for supplies."

"Yeah," Beaver said. "Joe's stock was gettin' low. He might run out if we don't get this drummer in there."

"How about Phineas Rensler?" Lefty asked.

"We got the barrier built, ain't we?" Loudmouth said. "The train's late now. It'll probably be later. It can't get past this barrier. We'll have plenty of time to come back and meet the Boston banker. We got a civic duty to Joe in at the saloon."

The men looked at each other and nodded. They were suddenly very civic-minded. And very thirsty.

They put the little man behind Loudmouth's saddle, slinging him across with his head on one side, his feet on the other, then they mounted and headed back for Seco, riding down the railroad right of way. As they got near town they saw the cluster of people at the station and Loudmouth recognized his daughter Ellie and his son-in-law Ben Rensler.

Ellie was holding a baby and Loudmouth's heart got so big it nearly choked him. He was mighty glad he had the whisky drummer behind his saddle. Maybe now Ellie would speak to him when she saw how he had been a good Samaritan and saved a man from the heat. He rode right up to the station platform, grinning at Ellie, sure of himself, and all of a sudden all hell broke loose.

The little whisky drummer came to. He snapped up like a jack-in-the-box, grabbed Loudmouth's pistol out of its holster, and whammed Loudmouth over the head with it. As Loudmouth slid out of the saddle he heard Ben Rensler yell one word: "Dad!"

Then two total strangers came charging around the corner of the station with guns in their hands and five men from town made running jumps off the platform and landed on the necks of Lefty, Whang, Shiftless, Beaver and The Kid. When the dust cleared some of the two strangers were standing there with drawn guns, the whisky drummer was jumping up and down demanding a reward, Ellie was crying, the baby was gurgling and having a fine time, and Loudmouth Jones was yelling louder than he had ever yelled before.

"Dad, how could you?" wailed Ellie. "This is the end. The absolute end! Don't you ever, ever speak to me again! Oh, Father Rensler, I don't know what to say!"

The little man quit jumping. He turned and stared at Ellie, and she was something to stare at. Her eyes were deep blue, accented by the outdoor tan of

her skin. Her hair was jet black, her eyelashes, dewy with tears, things of beauty. The little man removed his badly crushed derby hat.

"You—are—Ellie?" he said.

"Dad, I'm sorry," Ben Rensler said. "In all the excitement—"

"Why, my dear," said Phineas Rensler, "you are a beautiful girl! I had no idea. When I learned that your father's name was Loudmouth I just presumed you were Indian. And this is my little granddaughter!"

Loudmouth's bellow brought everything to a standstill. "Will somebody tell me what the damn hell goes on here?"

"Quiet, junior," one of the strangers with the gun said. He flipped back his lapel. "United States marshal. Tampering with a train is a Federal offense, you know."

"Ben!" screamed Loudmouth. "You're my lawyer—"

"I'm sorry, Loudmouth," Ben Rensler said, his face a mask. "I warned you."

The little man Loudmouth had taken for a whisky drummer came to the edge of the platform and peered over at Loudmouth, who was still flat on his back.

"Loudmouth?" the little man said.

"Yes, Loudmouth!" Loudmouth belated.

"Oh, you poor, poor dear," said the little man, putting his arm around Ellie and letting her weep on his shoulder. "But don't you worry about it. I'm a firm believer in environment over heredity. I'll take you and Ben and the baby away from this horrible place and you can start all over. The child, raised in a proper environment, won't have a trace of the taint of that train robber in her—"

"Loudmouth, you didn't *rob* the train too?" Ben Rensler said.

"Oh, of course he did," Phineas Rensler said. "He and his men robbed the

express car and relieved me of my valuables. I was the only passenger on the train. Marshal, I would appreciate it very much if you would retrieve my watch. You'll find it in the man's pocket."

He rubbed his hands energetically. "Then there's the matter of the reward." He smiled. "All in all, it was a good day, Benjamin. I got in my usual five-mile morning walk and, it seems, made a nice profit. I never like to break routine, Benjamin, and that is something for you to consider."

"Ben, listen to me," yelled Loudmouth. "It's a miscarriage of justice!"

"Loudmouth, this time you've gone a step too far," said Ben Rensler. "I have never been known to defend a guilty man. I don't expect to start now." He turned and took the arms of Ellie and his father and walked between them. "Father," said Ben Rensler, "you mustn't judge everyone in the West by what you've seen today."

The United States marshals looked at each other. "It's an ill wind that don't blow up a big stink someplace, I always say," said one.

"Yep," the second marshal said, "you're sure right. When Willy LaRue busted out of prison I figured we'd spend six mighty weary months just looking. And here we stumble right into a train robber and catch him red-handed."

At the name Willy LaRue the hair started lifting on the back of Loudmouth's neck. He exchanged glances with his crew and things started making a little more sense.

"Marshal," said Loudmouth, "did you say Willy LaRue?"

"Yeah," the marshal said, prodding Loudmouth with his gun. "I said Willy LaRue. Him and five of the toughest criminals in the Southwest broke out of prison about a week ago and headed this way. That's how come me and my partner to be here, and lucky we was,

seeing as how you decided to rob a train."

"Why, you loco steer!" yelled Loudmouth. "I didn't rob no train! It was Willy LaRue done it, don't you see that? That crazy whisky drummer—no, he ain't no whisky drummer, he's a Boston banker—why, he's all mixed up!"

The marshal looked at his partner and smiled sympathetically. "They're all the same, aren't they? Always try to lay it onto somebody else."

"But I didn't do nothin', I tell you!" Loudmouth yelled.

One of the marshals turned to the gathering crowd. "Please go through this once more," he said to the townspeople. "Did any of you hear this gentleman say he was going to wreck today's train?"

"Hear it?" a woman screeched from the back of the crowd. "We ain't been able to sleep for a week because of him yellin' about it."

"You all agree you heard this gentleman say he was going to wreck today's train?" asked the marshal.

There were twenty people on the platform. Twenty heads nodded.

"Oh, no," said Loudmouth Jones.

"Oh, yes," the marshal said. "Come along quietly, now. I promise not one of you will be hanged until after the trial."

CHAPTER THREE

Six Men in a Cell

ANTICIPATION OF DEATH by public strangulation was in itself an annoying enough thing. Besides, the day was hot, six men were sharing a cell intended for one, and there was no way for a man to relieve his gigantic thirst.

The thirst, in Loudmouth's case, had reached terrifying proportions due to his constant bellowing, a sound that blasted back and forth across the street and filled the town. It stopped suddenly

and everyone in town jumped half out of his skin. The silence was shocking.

"It's no use," said Loudmouth hoarsely. "We've played out our string. It's all a devilish plot dreamed up by that damn Boston banker so he can take my granddaughter away from me." He sat down on the cot and put his face in his hands.

The boys licked their dry lips and swallowed hard. Loudmouth Jones whipped was a tragic thing to see.

Incarceration for a crime he didn't commit and the threat of hanging had contributed to his defeat, of course, but only contributed. Those things were like excessive salt in a stew—the final pinch that was too much. The bitter stew itself was composed of equal parts Phineas Rensler and Willy LaRue.

They had been in jail about four hours, as close as Loudmouth could figure. The cell all six of them occupied faced directly onto the main street of the town and had, for many years, afforded a sort of youth recreation center for the small fry of Seco town. By standing on a box outside the barred window the kids could poke sticks into the cell to torment the repentant occupants. But they weren't doing this today. The town was too busy.

The saloon was overflowing with activity, people were driving in from outlying ranches, a sort of holiday feeling prevailed. And at the center of all this attention was Phineas Rensler, the Boston banker, father of Seco's popular young lawyer. It wasn't every day a man captured six train robbers single-handed.

Shiftless, the tallest man in Loudmouth's crew, stood at the window, giving a running account.

"What's he doing now?" Beaver asked dismally.

"Making another speech," Shiftless reported. "He's got a bat in his hand that looks like a small snowshoe. He keeps swinging it around. Says he plays five sets every morning before

breakfast, what the hell ever that means."

"Did he finish eatin' the raw carrots?" Whang asked.

"And a half a head of cabbage," Shiftless said.

"Crazy as a wall-eyed steer in a locoweed patch," Loudmouth said. "Boys, we got to do something. We can't let a man like that associate with that little baby. No tellin' what she might grow up to be."

"We ain't gonna do much in here," said Lefty.

"And Willy LaRue runnin' around loose," said The Kid. "All the fun of catchin' Willy goin' to waste—"

"Let me do the talkin'," said Loudmouth. "Here comes the marshals again. You boys keep your mouths shut. You've got me into enough trouble as it is."

The two marshals came and stood at the cell door. They stared long and hard at the caged prisoners.

"I can't figger it," said one of the marshals. "He robbed Phineas Rensler but we can't find the watch or the pocket-book."

"Because I ain't got it, you knuckle-head!" roared Loudmouth. "How many times do I have to tell you?"

"What happened to the other man?" one marshal demanded suddenly.

Loudmouth was caught off guard. This was the first mention that had been made of another man. "What other man?"

"Get Mr. Rensler in here," the marshal said. "Give him a chance to look them over again."

The marshals went away but returned promptly with Phineas Rensler. Phineas was glowing. He liked his work in Boston and he had made a few million dollars at it, but this excitement was very stimulating. The health program he followed so religiously had given him a bubbling energy that had not found an outlet in the staid corridors

of Boston's largest banking establishment. His cheeks were pink, his white Burnside whiskers bristling. He moved around as if he had springs in the balls of his feet. He peered through the bars and Loudmouth made a lunge at him. Phineas stepped back with the grace of a ballet dancer.

"Positive," said Phineas. "No two men could be that ugly. The youngest one I recognize also. He had a handkerchief over his mouth but that glazed look in his eyes is unmistakable."

"All right," one of the marshals said. "We're satisfied with your identification of these men. But how about the one that ain't here? The one with the little mustache."

"I could spot him anywhere," said Phineas Rensler. "His mask blew aside and I got a good look at him. He is dark, has this thin, hair-line mustache, and there is a wide scar that runs from the tip of his chin to the lobe of his left ear—"

"Willy LaRue!" roared Loudmouth Jones. "There, you see? It was Willy LaRue, not us!"

The marshal took a wanted dodger from the desk and studied it. "It tallies, all right," the marshal said. "These men here must have been working with Willy LaRue."

"Working with Willy LaRue?" screamed Loudmouth. "Why you dadburn peckerwood, it was me and my boys captured Willy LaRue in the first place and if it hadn't been for us he never would have been captured!"

"Too bad, Mr. Rensler," one marshal said, ignoring Loudmouth completely. "You did a wonderful job here today, but you let the big fish get away. Of course the railroad will pay a reward of some sort for the capture of these men, but there is a ten-thousand-dollar reward out for Willy LaRue, dead or alive." The marshal clicked his tongue against his teeth. "Too bad you couldn't have caught Willy LaRue!"

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Mrs. M.Z., Goldclote

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L.H., Pewlands Gill

Dear Sirs,—After some delay I wish to report on the success of my APAL. I received it on the 28th February at 08.00 hours and replaced it for a cigarette, and I am happy to say that I have not smoked since. I was a heavy smoker for 10 years.

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"Let us out of here," yelled Loudmouth. "We'll catch LaRue for yuh! We know every hide-out he ever had. We'll catch him and make him confess!"

"There's a good study in the criminal mind," one marshal said. "Willing to sacrifice a friend for possible court leniency—"

The marshal stopped suddenly and stared at Phineas Rensler. The little banker's mouth was open and there were dollar signs glowing in his pale blue eyes.

"Ten thousand dollars!" he breathed. "Take the price of the train ticket—which I have already arranged to have refunded because the carrier did not complete the contract—add the small expenses I have incurred—" He licked his lips. "Ten thousand dollars! A tremendous return on my investment. Much better than I could do with Copper Queen stock!"

"What, Mr. Rensler?" the marshal asked.

Phineas Rensler whinnied. "Nothing," he said. "Nothing at all." He approached the bars and gave Loudmouth's face a long, searching look. "You say you know where Willy LaRue can be found?"

"Course I know where he can be found," bellowed Loudmouth. "Ain't me and my boys played tag with him for twenty years? There ain't no place he can hide that we can't find him."

"Ten thousand dollars," said Phineas. He whinnied again. "Tell me where to find him," he said.

"No use, Mr. Rensler," one marshal said. "We've tried that. They won't talk."

"Ten thousand dollars," whispered Phineas Rensler. The dollar signs lit up and flashed and blinked out. He turned and went out into the street, walking in a daze.

"What the hell's got into him?" Beaver asked.

"Carrots and cabbage," said Shiftless. "Enough to kill any man."

"You boys ready to talk?" the marshals asked. "Ready to tell us how to find Willy LaRue?"

"Go to hell," said Loudmouth Jones.

The marshals went over to the saloon instead.

The afternoon dragged along with little to mark it except the growing thirst of Loudmouth Jones and his crew. At five the Chinese from up the street brought a bucket of stew and six tin plates. Phineas Rensler continued to be a town hero, but something had happened to him.

From time to time Shiftless reported the town's activities and there was a growing conviction within the cell that Phineas Rensler had run out of steam. According to Shiftless, he acted like a man in a daze. He made one small speech about the evils of drink, but it didn't seem to have much conviction, and then, just at dark, Shiftless reported two strangers in town. They were, according to Shiftless, mighty shifty-looking characters. So much so that Beaver climbed up to take a look for himself. When he climbed back down his face was grave. "Boys," said Beaver, "who owns the Cross T brand?"

"Fink Crenshaw," said Loudmouth. "What about it?"

"Reckon he's hired a couple of hands," said Beaver. "Those are Cross T horses those mean-lookin' hombres are ridin'. They seemed to be mighty interested in our friend Phineas Rensler."

Loudmouth showed more life than he had shown all afternoon. He dragged a bench over to the window and stood on it and peered out into the gathering darkness. He got a good look at the two horses, tied in front of the saloon, but the riders were nowhere to be seen.

"Something damn fishy here," said Loudmouth.

"Why?" asked The Kid.

"Why?" said Loudmouth, almost in

good voice. "Because that tight-fisted Pink Crenshaw never hired a rider in his life, let alone two, that's why. Them horses have been stole! And where is Pink Crenshaw's ranch? Right on the bank of the Tummisaw River, that's where. And where is that near? Right near Skull Canyon, which happens to be—"

"Willy LaRue's favorite hide-out!" said Whang.

"Right," said Loudmouth. "Them two jaspers is a couple of the outlaws that escaped from prison with Willy LaRue!"

"Marshal!" bellowed Loudmouth Jones. The sound slapped back and forth across the street. One of the marshals came out of the saloon, glanced over toward the jail, shrugged his shoulders and went back inside. "Marshal!" yelled Loudmouth, louder than ever. This time the marshal didn't even bother to come out.

"Of all the idiots," raved Loudmouth. "There's a couple of the criminals drinkin' elbow to elbow with them marshals—"

"Pssst!"

The sound was close, right under the window. The shadows from the street lay thickly on the front of the jail and night was coming on fast. "Pssst!" The sound came again.

"Don't pay no attention," said Loudmouth. "It's just some kids come to pester us. I got to do some thinkin'. We got to get out of here, boys. We got to catch Willy LaRue and make him confess to that train robbery. Then—" Loudmouth closed and unclosed his hands—"I'm gonna get me a great big handful of Boston throat and start squeezez'in'."

"Pssst!" came the sound from under the window. "Would you gentlemen like a drink of beer?"

Beaver moaned, "The black dogs are a-startin' to bite," he said.

"I'm seein' snakes," said Whang.

Sure enough, a snake was crawling

slowly through the barred window. It thrust itself out into the room then dipped down and hung there. Loudmouth stared at it.

"Damn it," he said, "that ain't no snake. It ain't got a head. It's a rubber hose like Joe connects his beer barrels with."

The voice from outside the window had a vaguely familiar sound. "Get your mouth around the hose and take a long pull," the voice suggested. "The other end is connected to a barrel of beer."

"Of all the dirty, tormentin' tricks," said Loudmouth. "I got a brush fire ragin' inside me and I'm plumb dehydrated. There ain't nothin' would taste as good as a few swallows of cold beer. It ain't human—" Loudmouth's eyes popped. Something moist was dripping out of the end of the hose. The cool, sour fragrance of beer seeped through the stuffy cell.

Shiftless licked his lips with a swollen tongue. "Some kind of a trap," he said. "I'll give it a try just to prove it ain't so."

"Get away," said Loudmouth, giving Shiftless a shove. He shouldered into Beaver and Whang, who had made a dive for the hose. "I'm boss of this crew," he yelled. "If it's a plot to poison us, it's up to me to take the first drag. I owe that to my men."

He snatched the hose, thrust it into his mouth and sucked hard. His cheeks collapsed, then filled. A look of sheer ecstasy and wonderment crossed his face. His cheeks filled, then emptied as he swallowed noisily.

"Is it beer, Boss?" Whang asked, almost in tears.

"Can't quite decide," said Loudmouth. He filled his cheeks and swallowed again. The ice-cold beer seeped down inside him and started putting out the fire. "It's beer," he said finally. "Cold, beautiful beer. Get your tin cups, boys. Maybe we died and went to heaven, I don't know, and I ain't gonna ask no

silly questions as long as this siphon keeps workin'—"

He thrust the hose in his mouth, took a long drag, and nearly swallowed his own cheek. "Hey!" he yelled. "It's quit runnin'!"

"Of course," the voice from outside the window said calmly. "I am pinching the hose." A smiling face appeared in the barred window. It was Phineas Rensler. "For a small consideration," said Phineas Rensler, "I shall unpinch."

Loudmouth's roar of rage was strangled as he thrust the hose into his mouth and tried again. A half swallow of beer came through, then Phineas held his section of hose up where they could see and deliberately pinched it closed between his thumb and forefinger.

"No!" moaned Beaver. "He can't do this! No injun ever thought up a torture like this!"

Phineas released the pressure on the hose ever so slightly. The siphon having been established, the beer gushed through in a fragrant, amber stream, the aroma of it filling the narrow cell.

"Just a small consideration," said Phineas.

"Anything," said Whang. "Anything you want."

"Shut up!" yelled Loudmouth, giving Whang a back-hand. "Can't you see what's he's up to? He wants me to sign away all my grandpappy rights to Ellie's little baby—"

"Oh no," said Phineas Rensler. "Nothing like that."

"Give him what he wants, Loudmouth," The Kid pleaded. "This lack of moisture is stuntin' my growth."

Loudmouth pulled the bench over to the window and stood on it. His face was even with Phineas Rensler's face and he saw that the banker had pulled a box under the window and was standing on it. Just to one side of the banker was another stack of boxes, and on these boxes was the keg of beer with the rubber

hose leading into it. Phineas held the hose, pinched firmly. He smiled, and Loudmouth's voice nearly knocked him off his box.

"What the devil you want, you ugly double-crossin' child-stealin' penny-pinchin'—Makin' kitchie-koos at that little granddaughter of mine, and you ain't even fit to associate with honest men!"

"At the moment that hardly seems a problem," said Phineas Rensler, dusting his lapel with the backs of his fingernails. "I am not presently associating with honest men. I am associating with train robbers."

"We didn't rob that train and you know it!" Loudmouth roared. "We couldn't of got as far away as we was, for one thing. You was scared and you got us mixed up and now you ain't got the guts to admit you made a mistake."

"It's hardly a matter of intestinal fortitude," said Phineas. He held up a forefinger. "Proceeding on the hypothetical theory that a mistake *has* been made—"

"Tell him to quit cussin' and unpinch the hose," pleaded Whang from below.

"You made a mistake and you know you did!"

"The town has made a sort of hero of me," said Phineas Rensler. "It has apparently been some time since they have seen a real masculine type who is able to handle things in a forthright manner. Having a hero to worship is good for people. I have no intention of destroying their idol by admitting that a mistake might have been made—"

"Might have been?" said Loudmouth. "It was!"

"But only this Willy LaRue person could prove it," said Phineas. "If he were to be captured and he had my watch and my valuables, then perhaps you and I could say we had worked this thing out together to lull the real culprit into a false sense of security."

"Say," breathed Loudmouth. "Now you're startin' to make sense, Rensler. How about unpinchin' that hose while I get another swaller? You get me and the boys out of here and we'll have Willy LaRue inside of three hours."

The hose came unpinched. Loudmouth had a teasing swallow and the hose pinched closed again.

"You are not getting out," said Phineas. "I wouldn't dare risk my reputation by aiding in the escape of criminals." He smiled. "But if you would tell me where I could find this Willy LaRue—"

"You?" said Loudmouth. "What the devil would you do after you found him?"

"I'd capture him," said Phineas blandly. "And I'd collect the ten-thousand-dollar reward." He released the hose. Beer gushed out and the men rushed at the dangling hose. The flow stopped immediately.

"Tell him, Loudmouth," Shiftless pleaded. "Let him go get himself killed. Tell him so he'll unpinch."

"Yes, Loudmouth," said Phineas Rensler. "Tell me how to find Willy LaRue."

"We'll go you one better, little man," a rough voice said from the darkness. "We'll show you how to find him."

Two figures moved out of the shadows. It was the two strangers who had ridden into town on the stolen Cross T horses. One of them clamped a hand over Phineas Rensler's mouth. The other jabbed a gun in Phineas Rensler's ribs.

"You talk too much, little man," one of the outlaws said.

"Willy LaRue is as anxious to see you as you are to see him, little man," the other outlaw said. "Willy's mask blew off and you got a look at the scar on his face. He was afraid you might remember him, and it looks like he was right."

"Glerk glerk," said Phineas Rensler.

"Have him unpinch the hose before they choke him!" wailed Whang.

"We got a horse for yuh," one of the outlaws said. "You come along and see Willy LaRue. He's got a party all planned for yuh."

Loudmouth was starting to sweat. He knew how much Apache there was in Willy LaRue. Loudmouth needed sustenance. He grabbed the hose and took a deep drag. He got a mouthful of air.

"The dirty cowards!" he screamed. "They pulled the hose out of the barrell Marshall!"

There was no response from across the street. Right there under Loudmouth's eyes the two outlaws loaded Phineas Rensler onto a horse and tied his legs under the horse's belly. They put a gag in Rensler's mouth, then rode calmly and serenely out of town.

The sweat was thick in Loudmouth's eyes. He sat down and started twisting his hands together. "Well," he said glancing at his crew from under shaggy brows, "that takes care of that. We don't have to worry about Phineas Rensler any more."

"That's right," said Whang. "Willy will carve on him awhile—maybe scalp them fancy whiskers off of him. Maybe burn him a little."

"Let him," said Loudmouth. "Serves him right." There were white patches on either side of Loudmouth's mouth.

"Sure," Beaver said. "Phineas Rensler don't mean nothin' to us. We was fixin' to get rid of him anyway. All he is is the baby's other grandfather." There was deep silence.

"Did you see him holdin' Ellie's little baby?" the sentimental Kid asked. "He was grinnin' all over, just like he was a human."

"I don't give a damn what happens to him," said Loudmouth.

"Pretty cute the way he got that keg of beer across the street and up on them boxes," mused Beaver.

"Might of been a pretty white sort of guy if he had lived," said Shiftless.

"Nervy little cuss," said Whang. "He won't look good all cut up."

"All right, damn it!" roared Loudmouth. "You're all agin' me! Here we got a perfect chance to let Phineas Rensler get what's comin' to him and you all go soft on me! Why in hell I ain't fired the whole bunch of yuh years ago I'll never know!"

He jumped up, his face white, his walrus mustache working. "All right, if rescuin' Phineas Rensler is the only thing that'll make you happy I'll go along with it even if I am plumb set agin' it." He glared at his men. "Well? What are we waitin' for?"

"Guns, for one thing," said the ever logical Lefty. "Somebody to open that door, for another."

CHAPTER FOUR

Beer and Bullets

SIX MEN looked at each other and then looked at the solid walls of the cell. They couldn't break out, but they were going to get out and they all knew it. Two voices, lifted in song, coming across the street toward the jail, seemed to fit perfectly into the pattern. . . .

"Get ptomaine, Beaver," whispered Loudmouth.

Beaver didn't question the strange request. These six men were a machine now, rolling in one direction. Beaver dropped to the floor, doubled up his knees, and clutched his stomach. He began to moan and groan and roll and thrash.

The outside door to the jail opened and the two United States marshals staggered in. They stopped spread-legged, focusing their gaze, then they ran over to the cell and stared in horror at the dying Beaver.

"Smatter?" one asked, goggle-eyed.

The men in the cell removed their

hats. "He's dyin'," said Loudmouth. "Poison food." Loudmouth started to weep. He raised his eyes to heaven and clenched his great fist and shook it at the gods of torment.

"Dyin' of poison food served by United States marshals! I go to the gallows gladly, dyin' in the name of prison reform. This here case will shock the nation. I got friends in the newspaper business and they'll put it on every front page. A man—a human bein'—dying of ptomaine while the law dogs that is supposed to guard him and protect him are out gettin' slopped up on booze—that evil downfall of me and all these here boys."

Loudmouth's chin dropped to his chest. The Kid sobbed quietly.

"Way mint," one of the marshals said. "Can't let man die. Might gish in trouble—" He fumbled for the keys and the other marshal steadied his wrist.

A moment later two United States marshals were sleeping quietly in the cell bunk while Loudmouth Jones and his crew, well armed with their own artillery, which they had recovered from the gun racks in the jail office, made a careful selection of the horses in front of the saloon.

A mile from town Loudmouth turned in his saddle. "We might as well finish that keg of beer," he said. "It's slowin' us down."

"Good idea," said Shiftless. He lowered the keg from where he had been balancing it on the saddle horn.

"Good thing I thought to bring the hose," said Beaver.

"Life is good," said The Kid, patting his two guns.

"Is it?" said Lefty, finishing his turn at the hose before checking his own gun.

"Why ain't it?" asked Loudmouth.

Lefty dolefully tolled off the points on his fingers. "Breakin' jail. Whoppin' a Federal officer. Stealin' six horses." He shook his head. "We'll ride the crooked trails, boys."

"We'll ride crooked trails and break out of jails," chanted The Kid. "How do you like that poetry, Beaver?"

"I prefer the beer," said Beaver. He took a deep drag and the barrel gurgled empty. He looked up, startled, his eyes suddenly wicked. "Say," said Beaver, "let's get at our work. The keg was just a teaser." He rolled the cylinder of his recaptured six-shooter affectionately.

"We're doomed," said Lefty.

Doomed or not, there was a job to be done and the closer Loudmouth and his crew got to Skull Canyon the more determined they became. They didn't talk about it, but there was no doubt in any of their minds about what was in store for Phineas Rensler. They admired the man's nerve—thinking he could capture Willy LaRue and his notorious outlaws single-handed. They liked a man who had faith in himself. But unless they got to Phineas Rensler quick, the Boston banker was going to learn about Indian methods the hard way.

"You think Willy will hole up in Skull Canyon, Loudmouth?" Whang asked, tight-lipped.

"It figgers," Loudmouth said. "We're the only ones that know about that tunnel that leads from the cliff out to the river and Willy figgers we're in jail. Them marshals wouldn't look in Skull, figgerin' it was a dead end box. If by any chance they did look there all Willy has to do is crawl through that tunnel and it will bring him out at Fink Crenshaw's horse ranch. Willy has probably got saddles stashed out and he can steal half a dozen horses before Fink knows what hit him."

Beaver was scanning the ground. "Them two outlaws have still got Phineas Rensler with them" he said. "One of the horses is packin' double."

"They'll keep him alive," Loudmouth said grimly. "They wouldn't want to cheat Willy out of his fun. Get your guns ready."

They came to the mouth of the apparent box canyon and they rode carefully now. The place looked like a perfect trap—steep side walls with talus footings, the slopes thick with brush and rocks, the end of the canyon a sheer granite cliff with a narrow ledge running across it halfway up. There seemed no escape from it, but Loudmouth and his boys knew there was. A cave opened off that ledge and ran straight through to the bank of the Tummisaw River. In some ancient time the river had run through the cleft, dropping in a waterfall over the precipice, carving out Skull Canyon. A pre-historic earthquake had closed off the gap, leaving this crooked tunnel.

"Keep an eye on that south slope, boys," Loudmouth said quietly. "I reckon that's where they'll be staked out. That's where they always hide the horses."

Practiced eyes scanned the slope, looking for some sign of the outlaws. The moon had come up, thick and fat, and it threw shadows from every chaparral and boulder. There was dead silence in the canyon. The sweat was thick on Loudmouth's face. This wasn't a good place to make a fight. The outlaws, hidden on the slope, had the advantage of being higher.

"You boys wait here," Loudmouth said. "I'll ride on ahead and see if I can't draw their fire."

"Go to hell, Boss," Lefty said softly. "You ain't no better than us. We got as much right to get shot at as you have."

The silence became eerie. The men strained their eyes, peering into the shadow-speckled night, ears alert for every sound. They were close to the cliff now and still not one move had been made against them.

"Maybe they sneaked on through the tunnel already," Shiftless whispered.

Loudmouth shook his head. "They can't take horses through that tunnel."

If they'd gone on, the horses they left would be around here someplace."

"That figgers," Beaver said. "Where in hell are they?"

The answer came unexpectedly. Directly above them, on the ledge that ran across the face of the cliff, a man yelled. Loudmouth and his men wheeled their horses and stared up at the cliff. What they saw made their blood curdle.

Phineas Rensler was up there, his coat half ripped from his body. He was running along the ledge, waving his arms, yelling, and directly behind him, a knife in his hand, was Willy LaRue. Rensler's thin voice cut down at them.

"Loudmouth! It's a trap! The outlaws are outside the canyon! They're going to ride in and catch you with your backs to the cliff!" The little man squealed and lashed out at Willy LaRue, who was slashing at him with the knife. "Take cover, Loudmouth!" Rensler yelled.

"We walked right into an ambush," Loudmouth groaned. "Take cover!"

The men sank their spurs and just then five riders came through the mouth of the canyon, their guns blazing. Loudmouth Jones had time to see old Beaver spill out of his saddle and then Loudmouth was standing in his stirrups, both guns roaring, and the rest of his crew was pressed around him, throwing lead against a charging band of escaped criminals who had everything to gain and nothing to lose.

Screaming lead poured in on Loudmouth. Three saddles empty now, and still Loudmouth yelled his men on, riding through a hail of bullets, a man who suddenly appeared gigantic, his great voice lacing the canyon, mingling with the roar of gunfire. There was no chance to pick targets. It was a case of fighting and winning, five men against five. And after that there was a little man from Boston to be saved, for without Phineas Rensler's warning Loudmouth and his boys would have been

drygulched and slaughtered and they knew it.

A horse went down and an outlaw made a run across an open space, looking for cover. He never got there. And now the animal-like screams of rage from Willy LaRue were crystal-clear above the sounds of the battle—the screams of a man bent on Apache revenge.

"Let's wind it up, boys!" yelled Loudmouth Jones. They made a wild charge and the two outlaws who were left threw themselves from their saddles and raised their hands. "Take 'em, Lefty!" Loudmouth ordered. "Me and Shiftless will get Willy LaRue!"

The escarpment above the talus made it impossible to ride far and Loudmouth dismounted, checking his crew. Beaver was down, he knew. A quick glance told him that The Kid was also missing and Whang was bending low in his saddle, his left hand clutched to his stomach, trying to grin.

"Go help Lefty," Loudmouth said, his voice strangely thick. "Ain't yuh got sense enough not to get shot?"

Whang slid his horse back down the talus slope and Loudmouth motioned for Shiftless to dismount. "Come on, boy," Loudmouth said. "That damn banker saved our hides, so I reckon we better save his. Damned if I'll be obligated to him!"

They climbed the slope then went out onto the ledge that led to the escape cave. Even knowing it was there, Loudmouth had some difficulty locating the mouth of the tunnel. He found it and leaned forward cautiously and peered inside. The roar of a gun immediately filled the cavern and lead left a silver streak an inch from Loudmouth's nose.

The thin voice of Willy LaRue drifted out of the depths of the cavern, hollow and distorted. "Don't try anything! I'll kill this little jaybird if anybody makes a move!"

"Go ahead and move if you like," the clipped, precise voice of Phineas Rensler

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said. "He was going to kill me anyway—" The voice cut off short and mushy, as if the speaker's lips had been mashed.

Loudmouth's heart started beating like a trip hammer. Phineas Rensler was still alive and somehow that mattered very much. Loudmouth scrubbed a finger under his nose. After all, dern it, the man was a grandpappy. "Am I gonna have to smoke yuh out, Willy?" Loudmouth called.

"Oh, it's you, Loudmouth, is it?" Willy taunted. "Come on in, Loudmouth old friend. Just step right into the opening of the cave there with the moon behind yuh."

"Well," called Loudmouth, "I hate to lose a good man like Rensler just to get a skunk like you, Willy, but I reckon there ain't no other way. Come on, Shiftless. Let's plug up this cave."

Shiftless gave him a startled look but Loudmouth shook his head and started heaving on a big boulder. Shiftless gave a hand and they made a terrible racket as they rolled the stone in place directly in front of the cave opening.

"Hear that, Willy?" Loudmouth yelled. "Beaver and the boys are around the mountain pluggin' up the other end."

"I don't believe it," Willy said. "You wouldn't kill the little jaybird just to get me."

"Wouldn't he?" Phineas Rensler said, surprised. "He was willing to wreck a train to get me, wasn't he?"

There was a long, long silence, and then Willy called, "Loudmouth! I got fifty thousand dollars right here in my saddlebags."

"Too bad you won't have no place to spend it, Willy," said Loudmouth. "I'll wait a week or so and then come in and get it. It'll still be there."

He and Shiftless made a racket rolling another large boulder in front of the cave entrance. "There," Loudmouth whispered, "that ought to cut off most of the light."

It was then that Shiftless saw Loudmouth's plan. He laid a bony hand on his boss's shoulder. "I get it," he whispered. "You and me'll crawl in there and get him—"

"Me will crawl in there," corrected Loudmouth. "You ride like hell around to the other end of the cave so in case he tries to make a run for it."

"You go on around to the other end," Shiftless said. "You'd be a lot better handling that end of it. I'll crawl in here—"

Loudmouth's fist looped up and cracked Shiftless solidly on the side of the head. The long, lanky man sagged at the knees and had to catch himself to keep from falling over the cliff. He stood there, his eyes crossed and dazed.

"Now, damn it to hell," said Loudmouth Jones, "you go do what I told yuh. If you don't like the orders around here, pack your soogans and ride to hell out of here. I been thinkin' strong of firin' yuh, anyhow."

"Loudmouth," Shiftless said, "if anything happens to you—"

"It's damn well gonna happen to you if you don't get movin'," Loudmouth roared. He gave Shiftless a push.

"What's goin' on out there?" Willy LaRue squealed.

"We're a-leavin' yuh, Willy," said Loudmouth. "So long."

Loudmouth stood there, watching Shiftless hurry down the slope. He thought of Beaver and The Kid and Whang, and he thought of all the fun life had been. He took a long look at the boulder he and Shiftless had rolled in place and saw that it had accomplished the purpose he had in mind. It shut off the moonlight from the entrance to the cave completely. He could slip around the boulder into its deep shadow without being outlined as a perfect target.

Loudmouth Jones squinted one eye, hitched his beltless pants with the flats of his hands, and spat over the bluff. Sorta crazy, he guessed, going into a

hole after a panther. But the way Loudmouth had it figured, if that half-crazy Willy LaRue was set on doing some cutting and killing he'd a sight rather do it on his old enemy Loudmouth than he would on Phineas Rensler.

Phineas, Loudmouth decided, hadn't lived very much. You could tell that by looking at him. It would be a shame to cut him off before he got started. Then, Ellie was probably right, too. It had hurt Loudmouth deeply, but she was probably right. Guess he was just an uncouth old hell-raiser, like she said, but a man kinda hated to have his daughter call him that.

Loudmouth sniffed and rubbed his nose. Well, no matter. Phineas Rensler was a high-class gent, no doubt about that. It wasn't as if the baby would be left with no grandpappy.

Loudmouth Jones reloaded his six-shooters and quietly stepped around the boulder into the mouth of the cave.

CHAPTER FIVE

Rawhide Rensler

IT WAS DARK. The cave made a couple of sharp bends and there was no starlight coming in from the opposite end and only a thin trickle of moon seeped around the boulder Loudmouth and Shiftless had rolled into place. Loudmouth moved along the sandy floor, keeping one hand on the slick rock wall, testing each step carefully. Some place ahead he could hear men breathing and then he heard Willy LaRue's voice.

"He means it, Rensler. He's gonna leave us in here to rot."

"I can think of no pleasanter an ending for you, Mr. LaRue," said the voice of Phineas Rensler.

"But you'll die too—"

"It doesn't matter," said Phineas Rensler, "as long as I know that little baby will have a grandfather like Loudmouth Jones."

Loudmouth swallowed the lump in his throat. Why, that doggone little sawed-off banker—

Rensler was talking again. "Of course, if the idea of slowly starving to death doesn't appeal to you, I'll be glad to put you out of your misery if you'll hand me one of your guns."

"Oh no you don't!" said Willy LaRue. "I'm gonna make damn sure you're dead before I am. I'm gonna use a little 'Pache on yuh. Like this!" There was a thudding sound, a quick cry of pain. "There," said Willy LaRue. "I don't reckon you'll use that finger again."

"Quite all right," said Phineas Rensler. "I can't think of any special use I'd have for it in the near future."

There was a long silence and then Willy yelled, a bit of panic in his voice now: "Loudmouth!"

The name boomed around the cavern and echoed back and forth, a hollow, ghostly sound. Loudmouth Jones pressed his back against the stone wall and held his breath. They were about twenty-five feet ahead of him, he figured. He wished there was some way of signaling to Phineas.

"There's no use calling Mr. Jones," Phineas Rensler said calmly. "He's gone. They're all gone. We're alone, Mr. LaRue."

"Shut up!" yelled Willy LaRue. There was a sound of a fist striking flesh, the thud of a body.

Loudmouth inched his way along the wall, his eyes bugging from holding his breath, his face slick with perspiration. He moved another ten feet and came to an outcropping of rock as high as a man's head. He stopped behind it and pressed his body to the wall. Stooping down he picked up a good-sized pebble and tossed it back toward the mouth of the cave. It hit the rock wall and rattled off, the sound amplified ten times.

"What's that?" screamed Willy.

"The devil coming for you," said Phineas Rensler.

Dead silence. After a long wait Loudmouth picked up another stone and tossed it back. It made as much noise as a horse on a hard road. Willy LaRue let out a string of curses and then the cave was roaring thunder and flashing lightning as Willy LaRue blasted away with his six-gun in the direction of the sound.

Loudmouth, pressed so tightly against the wall that he felt he was sinking into it, heard the lead whisper by his face and felt the scorching breath of it. Echoes roared through the cave, making it impossible to count the number of shots that had been fired. The only thing he had accomplished, then, was to accurately locate Willy LaRue and Phineas Rensler. They were there ahead of him in a sort of widened room. Nothing to do now but wait and hope that Willy would start moving around and separate himself from Phineas and come this way— Loudmouth had no more than expressed that silent hope when LaRue changed everything.

"I'm gonna kill you now, Rensler," Willy said quietly. "I want to make sure I have that last pleasure. I'm not going to do it with a gun. I've got a knife here and I remember a trick my 'Pache uncle taught me."

The whisper of the knife being drawn from a sheath was clear and distinct. There was a rip of cloth, then the sharp intake of breath of a man feeling steel against his bare skin—

Loudmouth Jones pushed himself away from the wall and threw himself at the spot where the winks of gunfire still burned as a memory in his eyes. He collided solidly with a human form and his hand closed on an upraised arm and he knew it was Willy LaRue.

The knife slashed at Loudmouth's shoulder; a knee caught him in the groin. He lashed out with his fist and

connected hard and he heard Phineas Rensler yelp.

"Get out of the way, damn yuh!" yelled Loudmouth. "Run for it!" A small fist without much power behind it landed smack against Loudmouth's nose. "Damn it, Rensler!" Loudmouth bellowed, "I told you to run for it!"

Willy LaRue fought with all the wildness of a cornered animal. He sank his teeth into Loudmouth's arm, he kicked, he gouged, he slashed with that knife. Time and again he brought his knee sharply into Loudmouth's groin until there was nothing but a blinding sheet of pain in front of Loudmouth's eyes and he felt his grip weakening on Willy LaRue's knife arm.

The pain was like fire, and suddenly it was fire, bright and startling in the darkness, and there stood Phineas Rensler, a lighted match in his hand, holding it high like a torch. The hand that held the match was bloody; the other hand held a sizable rock.

"So there you are," said Phineas Rensler, carefully measuring the distance between himself and LaRue with his eyes. "So that's the way it is—"

The match winked out. There was a sickening thud, as if someone had dropped a ripe melon on a rock. And suddenly Willy LaRue wasn't fighting any more.

"I suppose that does it," said Phineas Rensler.

Loudmouth stood there, his lungs gasping in air. "Thanks," he muttered finally.

"Not at all," said Phineas Rensler. "I had no intention of letting you claim the reward for the capture of this scoundrel. Shall we pack him out of here?"

"We shall pack him," said Loudmouth Jones.

THEY CAME OUT of the far end of the cave with a mighty quiet Willy LaRue between them, Phineas packing the feet, Loudmouth the arms, Willy's dragging

behind finding every rock along the way. Three men were waiting for them. One was Shiftless, disarmed and chagrined. The other two were the noticeably sobered marshals.

"Heh!" the marshals said in unison.

"Heh indeed," said Phineas Rensler. He dropped to his knees and rapidly searched Willy LaRue. Triumphant he held up a gold watch and a pocket book. "There you are, gentlemen," said Phineas to the lawmen. "I give you Willy LaRue, the man who held up the train and robbed me."

"But," said one of the marshals, "you said it was this man here." He indicated Loudmouth.

"I did?" said Phineas, surprised. "I don't recall it. Loudmouth, old friend, did you hear me accuse you and your boys of robbing a train?"

"Ridiculous," replied Loudmouth.

"Why, you and me are grandparents."

Phineas clicked his tongue against his teeth. "Federal lawmen. Drinking to such excess that they start hearing things."

"He broke out of jail!" yelled the marshal. "You can't deny that!"

"Don't worry, Loudmouth," said Phineas soothingly. "I know six senators and the attorney general is one of my closest friends. You can sue the United States Government for ten million dollars for false arrest. As for these contemptible drunkards, I am quite sure I can get them fifty years apiece in Federal prison."

"Now wait a minute, Mr. Rensler," one of the marshals said, starting to sweat. "If there's been a mistake made—"

"There has," said Phineas, "and you made it. Give the tall gentleman his gun, and I suggest you get busy rounding up the rest of Willy LaRue's crew."

"Won't be necessary," said Loudmouth. "You'll find 'em all rounded up back in Skull Canyon."

The two marshals gave Shiftless his gun and rode off fast. It was a complete

victory, but there wasn't much pleasure in it for Loudmouth. He kept thinking of Beaver, whom he had seen fall. And The Kid—as nice a youngster as a man ever raised. And Whang had been bad hit. He might be a goner by now.

A lot of the beauty went out of the breaking dawn and Loudmouth's eyes blurred. He went over and stood by Shiftless and the two men stared at the ground, thinking the same thoughts, unable to put them into words. They swallowed against the pain in their throats and held their tears and they barely heard the familiar voice asking: "Happen to be a drink in the crowd?"

All of a sudden that voice hit home. Loudmouth and Shiftless jerked their heads up and there, riding around the shoulder of the hill, his head wrapped with his shirt, one protruding front tooth broken off halfway up, was Beaver. Riding at his side, his shirt blood-soaked, one arm in a makeshift sling, was The Kid. The Kid was helping hold a grinning Whang in the saddle.

At times like this Loudmouth had to fight himself pretty strong to cover up his sentiments, but he usually managed it. He strode forward, one eye squinted tight shut, his hands on his hips. He glared up at the wounded men.

"And just where in the hell do you think you've been?" he roared.

"I got a little crease on the head," said Beaver, lisping a bit because of his swollen mouth and his broken tooth.

"I saw some pretty flowers," said The Kid. "Couldn't resist stoppin' to pick me some."

"Me," said Whang, "I been catchin' up on my readin'."

Loudmouth's voice spooked every horse for a mile around. "I'm of a notion to fire the whole lot of yuh!" he yelled, shaking his fist at them. "No-goodest bunch of worthless—"

His voice was beginning to choke up a bit so he turned his back on them. "Go get yourselves patched up," he

snarled. "Makes me sick to look at yuh. Ain't none of yuh fit to associate with men like me and Phineas Rensler."

There. He had said it. And it hadn't been hard to say, either. He glanced up at Phineas and then glanced away and he didn't know for sure just what the devil he should do or say next.

Phineas Rensler seemed to know. "Loudmouth," he said, "you and I ought to take on a little nourishment. May I suggest a vegetable product?"

"You mean them raw carrots and cabbage?" Loudmouth yelped.

"I was thinking of corn juice," said Phineas Rensler. He hitched his belt with the flats of his hands, spat at his toe, and pushed his derby up from the back. "I thought it might be good for this mashed finger of mine."

"Well, come on," said Loudmouth. "Let's go get some before the infection sets into yuh."

THE DOCTOR WAS ADAMANT in his demand that Beaver, The Kid, and Whang spend some time in bed, so Loudmouth had three beds moved into the saloon. Later he had four more beds moved in. This Phineas Rensler, for a little fellow, was quite a man. This was making up into an all-night session.

Toward evening Ben Rensler and Ellie walked past the saloon. The door was wide open so they stopped and peered inside. Loudmouth and Phineas were bellied up to the bar, each yelling at the top of his voice.

"If it hadn't been for me there wouldn't be no reward," Loudmouth yelped. "I claim it all!"

"I'll wrestle you for it," said Phineas, weaving away from the bar and rolling up his sleeves. "Plus the cost of my coat which Willie LaRue cut off my back plus the ten dollars it cost me to get the marshals drunk plus the cost of one keg of beer."

"Hell with it," said Loudmouth. "Too much bookkeeping. I'll give you one of

my coats. We'll take the reward money and build a private school for our granddaughter. I want Lola to have the best."

"Lola?" said Phineas. "And who says her name is to be Lola?"

"That was my wife's name," said Loudmouth. "The baby's gonna have the same name as my wife."

"The baby's name is Belle," said Phineas, cocking his fist. "My wife's name was Belle. Baby's goin' have same name as my wife."

"I'll fistfight yuh for it," said Loudmouth.

"Ben," Ellie said, worried, "don't you think we better stop them?"

Ben Rensler grinned and kissed his wife's cheek. "Not for a million dollars, honey," he said. "It's the first time Dad has had any fun since Mother died."

THREE DAYS LATER, sober, shaved, and neatly dressed, Phineas Rensler and Loudmouth Jones sat in the cool living-room of Ben and Ellie's house. The baby was on Loudmouth's knee. Phineas was leaning forward impatiently, his eyes glued to the clock. At exactly a quarter to the hour a triumphant gleam came into Phineas's eyes.

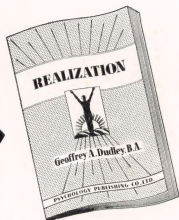
"Your time's up!" he yelped. "My turn to hold her!"

Loudmouth looked ruefully at the clock. "Guess that's right, Lola Belle," he said to the baby. "It's only for fifteen minutes. Try to put up with him."

Phineas Rensler reached out his arms. "Cootchy cootchy," he said. "Come to Grandpaw Rawhide, Lola Belle."

Ellie closed the crack of the kitchen door quietly. She put her hand against her forehead and faced her husband. "Oh no!" she said. "Rawhide Rensler, he calls himself now!"

"Loudmouth's boys gave him that name," said Ben. He grinned proudly. "Sort of fits, don't you think?"



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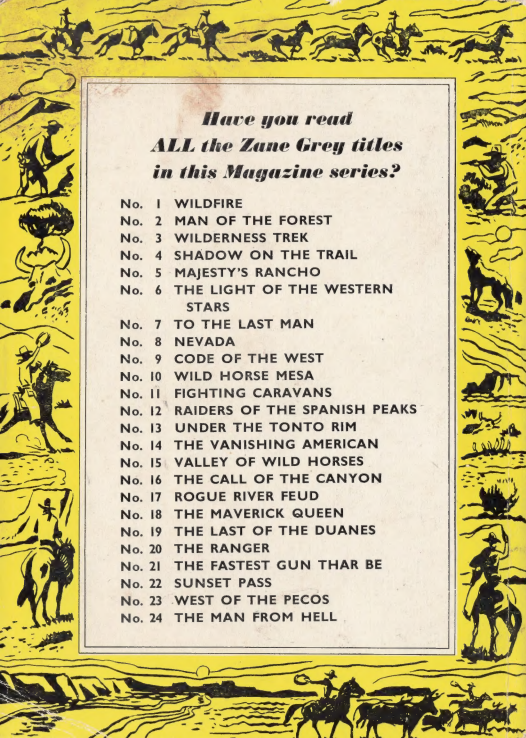
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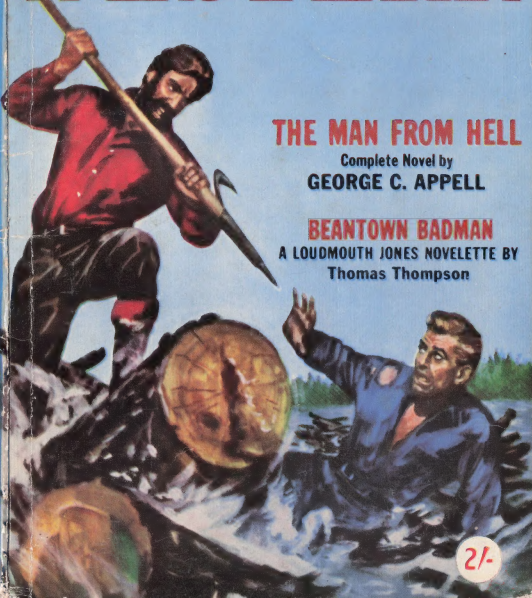
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